

CRITICAL REALISM IN CONTEMPORARY ART

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This study responds to the recent reappearance of realism as a viable, even urgent, critical term in contemporary art. Whereas during the height of postmodern semiotic critique, realism was taboo and documentary could only be deconstructed, today both are surprisingly vital. Nevertheless, recent attempts to recover realism after poststructuralism remain fraught, bound up with older epistemological and metaphysical concepts. This study argues instead for a “critical realism” that is oriented towards problems of ethics, intersubjectivity, and human rights. Rather than conceiving of realism as “fit” or identity between representation and reality, it is treated here as an articulation of difference, otherness and non-identity. This new concept draws on the writings of curator Okwui Enwezor, as well as German critical theory, to analyze the work of three artists: Ian Wallace (b. 1943, Shoreham, UK), Jeff Wall (b. 1949, Vancouver, British Columbia), and Allan Sekula (b. 1951, Erie, Pennsylvania, d. 2013, Los Angeles). Placing their art in a critical-realist framework not only offers an original perspective on three established artists whose practices have long been seen as mutually divergent, but connects their accomplishments to broader themes in modernist historiography, particularly anti-theatricality, commodification and utopian longing.

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PREFACE

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This dissertation is dedicated to Allan Sekula.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

This study responds to the reappearance of realism as a viable, even urgent, critical term in contemporary art. Whereas during the height of postmodern semiotic critique, realism was taboo and documentary could only be deconstructed, today both are surprisingly vital. In this dissertation I will provide a new account of realism. I focus on the work of three contemporary artists who all draw on realist traditions: Ian Wallace (b. 1943, Shoreham, UK), (b. 1949, Vancouver, British Columbia), and Allan Sekula (b. 1951, Erie, Pennsylvania, d. 2013, Los Angeles). These artists share no “school” or style and have not been brought together before for analysis. My approach will allow us to see these artists’ works differently and may be expanded to encompass a wider range of contemporary practices.

Of these artists, Allan Sekula is the most obvious candidate for a reconsideration of realism, since his practice has long been informed by the tradition of social documentary photography, which raises the problem of reality and reference. He has also chosen to focus on subject matter related to labor, which has an iconographic tradition going back to nineteenth-century realism. For example, in his monumental cycle *Fish Story* (1989-1995), he photographed the people and places that link various parts of the vast maritime economy: shipbuilding, containerization, scavenging, tourism, and militarism. However, his work displays interesting features that are not easily accounted for in traditional accounts of realism that emphasize authenticity and accuracy, such as working in diptychs or triptychs. For example, images number four and five in *Fish Story* both portray pipe fitters working in Campbell Shipyard in San Diego Harbor. They work in a tight interior space among a chaotic network of pipes in many colors and sizes. The two images were clearly made in close temporal proximity, possibly even captured in adjacent frames: the poses and lighting are almost the same in both. The working men are lit with a direct flash, which creates the sense of spontaneity and immediacy we expect from documentary photography. But why double the frames rather than simply pulling the “best”,

most complete image to tell the full story, like the Spanish Republican soldier at the decisive moment of mortal injury, struck from life but suspended before death? By contrast, Sekula's doubling is unnerving, suggesting the inherent incompleteness of the single shot. It draws out a tension inherent in the technics of the photographic frame, which must isolate in order to represent. Given Sekula's long-standing interest in the documentary tradition, particularly its historical connection to radical politics, how should we read this device? Is it a critique of documentary aspiration to capture the decisive moment within the single frame? Or does it move towards a more complete realism, precisely by laying bare the device, drawing attention to the inevitability of framing?

Clearly, realism is important to Sekula's work. There are moments in *Fish Story* when the raw material of life reasserts itself against the abstractions of information; at other times, most notably in his images of images (photographs, sculptures, and signs, including a meaningless script intended to evoke a South Asian written language at a military training site), the abstractions of value, signification and information become astonishingly concrete. Sekula's work raises issues of reference, in particular, the challenge of representing labor under conditions of globalization, when "work" has become dispersed and casualized. Yet older approaches to realism that understand the concept as a "fit" between representation and reference fail to explain the use of the diptych in terms of the artist's deep commitment to representing social reality and his skepticism towards traditions that claim to do so. What this dissertation attempts, through a qualified "critical" realism, is to offer a more suitably dialectical account, by treating the old problem of "fit" between representation and reference as a problem of identity and non-identity. The goal is less to carve out a new definition of realism by specifying its formal or thematic features, and more to explain the meaning of our continued desire to grasp reality in images, even when postmodern theories of signification have taught us that we ought to know better. In this context, Sekula's art and writing becomes exceptionally rich, since he explicitly wanted to avoid reinforcing the notion that we live in a virtual world where work has been transformed into play and the signified into the signifier, as though the constraints of geography, materiality and class no longer have any consequence. Indeed, part of his project is precisely to remind us of their ongoing importance, which also suggests the ongoing importance of realism.

Jeff Wall and Ian Wallace are less intuitive but equally rich cases. Wall famously stages his photographs to mirror the compositional strategies of tableau painting, but many of his motifs are based on actual events he witnessed.

In *Diatrobe*, which I analyze below, we see two women walking; one is holding a child and opens her mouth to speak. Wall identifies the figures in an interview as working-class mothers, who he observed at “playgrounds, clinics, supermarkets, and laundries” (Wall 2007, 191). The clarity and detail of the image, like Sekula’s use of direct flash, assures us that nothing is hidden, that everything is on the surface. The everyday subject and setting appear plausible, even banal. It is clear what this picture is *of* (its subject matter) and at the same time we struggle to grasp what it is *about* (how we should read its deeper, symbolic meaning). And it is precisely here that the problem of realism emerges, as a dialectic between what is clearly visible and what remains obscure. It is, in short, a problem of identity and non-identity, which Wall addresses by offering a picture of working-class mothers that is completely pictorially lucid, but which we experience as incomplete, obscure, resistant to interpretation. Wall’s realism is not about creating a perfectly accurate or complete picture that we can identify with the thing it represents, but about emphasizing the reality of what escapes representation, living beyond the boundary that marks historically real, social difference. If anything, the desire to identify things with their images in an attempt to better understand them, is part of the problem. And yet, the desire persists. Wall’s usual pictures, which capture everyday objects, figures and settings, treating them as monumental and significant, express a continued desire to grasp things as they are, significant in themselves. Understanding Wall’s work as a critical realism, a realism of difference, allows us to see how knowing things is inextricably bundled up with granting those things their own autonomy, so that realism appears not just a problem of epistemological “fit” but of ethical relation.



Figure 1 Ian Wallace, *My Heroes in the Street*, 1986, photolaminate, acrylic on canvas, installation view, Kunstverein, Düsseldorf, 2008. Left: *Keith*, 102 x 230 cm, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen – Pinakothek der Modern, Siemens Arts Program, permanent loan of Siemens Aktiengesellschaft. Center and right, respectively: *Shelagh* and *Rodney*, 101 x 221 cm. Collection of Greta Meert, Brussels.

Wallace shares many of these interests with his Vancouver colleague. Although he began as a painter, his mature work juxtaposes monochrome painting and photography. A good example of this is his breakthrough hybrid work, *My Heroes in the Street* [fig. 1], which is composed of three large-scale panels. Each has two “wings,” which are painted an even white and sandwich a photographic print. The monochrome emphasizes the materiality of the painted surface, while the photograph, although existentially dependent on its subject, when set against the flat painted surface, appears illusionistic. By juxtaposing photography and monochrome painting, these bi-form works raise questions about differing conceptions of realism, while also alluding to the history of modernist abstraction. One of Wallace’s earliest influences was Piet Mondrian and he continues to describe himself and his work as modernist. Between the competing traditions of modernism (identified with abstraction) and realism (identified with figuration) it is difficult—perhaps impossible—to “locate” Wallace’s realism (is abstraction more or less real than figuration?). But this question only makes sense if we continue to treat realism as a “fit” between reality and representation. But contrast, I will argue that Wallace’s

strategy does not identify with either tradition; rather, it is insistently relational, with each part pushing against the other, even as their edges meet and occasionally, provisionally settle into a dialogue about the possibility of unity. Wallace is less interested in overcoming the division between reality and representation than in understanding how different realities emerge socially, compete with each other in the form of politics, and how art can transmit this multiplicity by digging into its own aesthetic traditions. Wallace, like Wall and Sekula, but even more explicitly, relies on anti-expressive sources for his art. But he does not believe, straightforwardly, that pulling the artist's interior Self back from the work allows external reality to appear in it. His practice suggests some adjacent, more thoroughly dialectical ideas. By drawing on existing forms, materials, or signs, whose contexts will always exceed his art, Wallace positions his works as a site where they can collide in new ways. This calls for a relational, dialectical, and critical approach to realism, which this dissertation seeks to develop.

Realism, however, remains a fraught category and there is little agreement about its definition or features. In particular, it is challenging to develop a plausible theory of realism after poststructuralism. Consequently, many contemporary commentators on art are skeptical towards categories of reality and realism, even as they acknowledge that contemporary art calls for an engagement with them. Most often, this skepticism leads commentators to collapse the difference between signifier and signified; for them, signs *are* the new reality. For example, British curator Mark Nash argued:

there is no longer any mileage to be gained from the opposition between fiction and reality. Decades of post-Structural philosophizing (for example, Jean Baudrillard's notion of simulacrum) have inured us to the argument that it no longer makes sense to try and distinguish between reality and its representation. At the same time documentary has become a means of attempting to re-establish a relationship to reality. The pertinent question, perhaps, is what kind of social, political or personal reality is being proposed. (2008, n. p.)

If reality and representation are one, then there is no way to ask the question about the relationship between contemporary art and reality, since reality itself no longer has any status. The most common solution to this problem is to abandon theories of realism in favour of theories of fiction, performativity and constructedness. This direction has become a major occupation for

many commentators.¹ For example, in 2010 the Generali Foundation produced *Hinter der vierten Wand*, an exhibition subtitled “fictitious lives, lived fictions,” which included work by Ian Wallace and Allan Sekula, as well as by Harun Farocki, Omer Fast, Mik Aernout and others. In the absence of reality, our ability to know it, or maybe both, Folie and Lafer propose to showcase the ways that artists instead “aim to show reality under construction, in all its complexity” (Lafer 2010, 130). Yet again, however, this is no solution since it falls into the same trap as Nash’s approach, shifting the focus of analysis from reality to reality-under-construction. And yet, some contemporary art, like the work by the artists mentioned above, clearly demands to be understood in some way that engages seriously with history, social structure and materiality. Therefore, this model cannot accommodate their work.

I will depart from these approaches in the belief that reality remains ethically indispensable, and that if older realisms are no longer acceptable, then rather than simply discarding reality altogether, we should develop better models of realism. The approach I propose is “critical realism”—not a new category with a clearly-defined set of features (such as figuration, for example), but a way of approaching contemporary art that draws out artists’ occupation with ethical as well as epistemological issues. To do this I will draw on foundational work by the curator Okwui Enwezor and German critical theory and in particular the work of Theodor Adorno, which provides a useful vocabulary and dialectical framework.

1.1 HISTORICAL RATIONALE

My choice to approach these artists’ work through critical theory is historically motivated by the fact that Wallace, Wall and Sekula were all familiar with its key texts as students on the west coast (Briths Columbia and California), as a result of their exposure to the radical politics of the New Left. They read widely, consuming issues of *Artforum* and *Screen*, as well as new

¹ There are far too many to create an exhaustive list. However, some key theories developed according to this model include: documentarism (Steyerl 2005, 2003), aesthetic journalism (Cramerotti 2009), postmodern documentary (Williams 1993), performative documentary (Bruzzi 2006) and others (Henry 2006, Rhem 2004, Beausse 1999a, 1999b).

translations of French and German philosophers. Marxism was particularly important, especially the cultural Marxism of the Frankfurt School, which emphasized the complex interdependencies of art, language and social formations. Wall, for example, remembers this as an “ultraleft” moment, naming Herbert Marcuse as one of the primary conduits of German critical philosophy for his hungry English-speaking cohort. Wall heavily annotated his copy of Benjamin’s “The Author as Producer” while learning to argue from Adorno using concepts like mediation, class and freedom (Wall 2007, 205-06). Historians including Peter Galassi (2007, 16-17), and Charlotte Townsend-Gault (1993, 16) have all noted the influence of critical theory, especially Adorno’s posthumously-published *Aesthetic Theory* (Roelstraete 2006, 32), which Wallace incorporated into his teaching after 1984 when it became available in English translation (Müller 2008, 58). The American artist Dan Graham even goes so far as to claim retrospectively that when Wall returned to Vancouver, Simon Fraser University hired him, in large part, “because he was on the left” (Lauson 2009, 240).

Wall and his classmates at University of British Columbia were helped by the presence of Ian Wallace, who was fluent in such foreign theoretical languages and incorporated them into his classes at the Vancouver School of Art, where he had begun teaching in 1972 (now Emily Carr University of Art and Design) (Wallace 2012, 320). Roy Arden (b. 1957), a younger artist, remembers Wallace’s “Art Now” class as an exception to the traditional rule of fine art photography, where students read feminism, the Frankfurt School, poststructuralism and semiotics and Hans Haacke and Sherrie Levine gave guest lectures (Arden 2005, 3).² Indeed, Wallace’s influence as a teacher has at times eclipsed his reputation as a practicing artist, leading journalists and critics to refer to him, typically, as the father or even “godfather” of Canadian photoconceptualism (Harris 2013). The art historian Steve Edwards describes the energetic reception in Vancouver as “a Lukácsian mise-en-scene. The effect was to generate a project based on a synthesis of avant-garde concerns, Adorno’s social philosophy, Lukács’s idea of

² My research has not confirmed this, but one available list of Art Now visiting artists, from the 1978-79 academic year, is equally as impressive. From New York: Jacki Apple, curator, Liza Bear, video artist, multi-disciplinary artists James Collins, Dan Graham, Nancy Holt, Antonio Muntades; from Los Angeles: Michael Asher, Chris Burden; from San Francisco: Martha Rosler and Paul Waszink, sculptor; from Rome: the critic Achille Bonito Oliva (Emily Carr 1978, 40.) Art Now was taught under the curriculum’s “interdisciplinary division” which included art history. Wallace also taught surveys of western art, humanities, and media history.

typification and Brecht's characterology. The direct comparisons would seem to be with Peter Bürger, Alexander Kluge and Allan Sekula" (Edwards 2007, 39). When Vancouver-trained painter Robert Linsley (b. 1951) had occasion to write about Wallace's photographs of bureaucratic urban spaces for an exhibition catalogue, the "Frankfurt School's critique of administered culture" was a natural hook for him to hang the discussion on (Linsley 1992, 115).

In 1968, Wall drafted an MA thesis for his advisors at the University of British Columbia, intercutting long excerpts of Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) with pages of dense, prolix exegesis and his own musings on alienation, class, and revolution. That same year, Sekula was completing his first year at the University of California, San Diego, where he would come to study with Marcuse himself, who had arrived in California three years prior, when his contract at Brandeis University was not renewed.³ Sekula remembered Marcuse as a controversial figure. "I had read all sorts of damning media accounts of his influence on the European student left while I was still in high school in San Pedro, and studying with him seemed like a great idea." He read *One-Dimensional Man* in the summer of 1968 after completing Marcuse's first-year humanities course (Sekula 2003, 28) and quickly absorbed Marx (especially the *Eighteenth Brumaire*), Horkheimer and Adorno, Benjamin, Hans Magnus Enzensberger, mixing German ideas with those of C. S. Peirce, Susan Sontag, Roland Barthes, Marshall McLuhan and the Birmingham School cultural studies (Sekula 2006 [with Guerra], 17-18, 50).

This brief historical background suggests that critical theory, social reality and art cannot be separated when analyzing these artists' work. It also suggests that understanding the problem of realism purely as an epistemological one (the problem of "correspondence") is too narrow. Rather, a fuller account would need to acknowledge the importance of social questions to contemporary realism and in particular, the way that intersubjectivity is acutely present as a problem in critical-realist art, even when social themes are not directly represented through traditional iconographies of labor. In developing this intersubjective account, I follow the recommendation of Robin Kelsey and Blake Stimson for a social and ethical approach to photography (in their words, "accountability" or "responsibility") (Kelsey and Stimson 2005,

³ According to the European Graduate School, Marcuse's vocal opposition to the war in Vietnam led to conflicts with the university's donors (European Graduate School, no date).

xxiii-v). The alternative, as they correctly note, is the one we are living in: “Promise turns to myth, and myth to the boredom of repeating the great postmodern truth we already know” (xxiii).

1.2 DOCUMENTARY AND BIOPOLITICS

To do this, I build on a well-known argument offered by Okwui Enwezor, the creative director of documenta 11, which marked the “documentary turn” in contemporary art.⁴ A major catalyst for the documentary turn, Enwezor argues, was not just poststructuralism and the media but the discovery of “biopolitics” by contemporary artists. It seems to me that the cluster of issues this suggests—otherness, difference, the unruly particularity of human bodies—is something distinct from the claims that media and poststructuralism weakened reality, something that calls for its own distinct (but not separate) conversation.

Enwezor lays out this argument in an article entitled “Documentary/Verité: Bio-Politics, Human Rights and the Figure of ‘Truth’ in Contemporary Art”.⁵ Below the title, he placed two epigraphs. The first, on art and catastrophe, was pulled from Adorno on museums⁶ and the other, quoting Emmanuel Levinas, criticized the modern substitution of reason for ethics (Levinas 1998). Together they hinted at the direction Enwezor intended to pursue. In his own words:

I will argue that the kinds of political realism in artistic practices often associated with social reality, and which to a great extent also engaged with ethical consideration for

⁴ documenta 11 also included work by Allan Sekula and Jeff Wall. “Documentary turn” refers to the use of “tools of the documentary and the function of the archive” in contemporary art. Enwezor stated that this was an important consideration in curating documenta 11 (Enwezor 2008, 101).

⁵ I quote from a later version published in *The Greenroom* (Enwezor 2008), identical to the version published in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art* (Enwezor 2003). In the intervening years it was also revised and considerably shortened (by the author I assume) for the catalogue that accompanied Nash’s *Experiments with Truth* (Nash 2004). Although the title listed in the table of contents matches earlier versions, the text itself, beginning on page 97, carries the different title “documenta11: Documentary and the Reality Effect” (Enwezor 2004).

⁶ The discussion in “Valéry Proust Museum” is framed as a debate between Valéry and Proust on the merits of high and low culture (Adorno 1996).

human subjects, owe a great deal to the discovery by contemporary art of the importance of the idea of ‘bio-politics’: a politics grounded in explorations of the meaning of life and the ethico-juridical sanctity of the human within current global realignments of political, economic, and cultural formations. (Enwezor 2008, 31-32)

Clearly, on his view, the absorption of documentary into contemporary fine art is not merely a formal affair. The goal is not to find new solutions to old problems of design, nor to invigorate an exhausted pictorial tradition, but to explore the status of the human by drawing on human rights discourses. The argument is not that human rights “caused” the documentary turn exactly, but that the images of mass human suffering (displacements, genocide, man-made and natural disasters) came to interest artists and that this suffering, as well as the images and words we use to describe it, represents a fundamental shift from modernity to “a new kind of political order to which contemporary art responds” (2008, 68).

The exact shape of this new political order is never specified; rather, it functions in Enwezor’s argument as a stand-in for the disappearance of class struggle as an organizing rubric for aesthetic and more specifically utopian values that once defined the modern situation. Still, it is still more historically specific and therefore more helpful than generalized claims that reality is disappearing. But whereas Enwezor still attempts to *accommodate* difference to realism through “vérité,” and like the others fails to find a path from subjectivity to the object, I take the stronger view that realism can be understood *as* difference, and therefore need not be conceived as merely consistent with it. This would be a critical realism and it can be achieved, I suggest, by following Adorno’s path to the “priority of the object” and being attentive to experiences of heterogeneity, disjunction, inadequacy in works of contemporary art.

1.3 THE PROBLEM REFRAMED AS A PROBLEM OF IDENTITY-THINKING

The first step is to return to a basic question: what exactly is the problem with realism? This question is never asked, at least outside philosophy departments, because we assume that there is consensus around the answer, and that the answer has already been provided by “decades of poststructural philosophizing.” Most of us probably assume that “realism” refers to a text that

claims to show things “as they really are.” But this just begs the question: what is the problem with showing things “as they really are”? In an influential anti-realist text, “Realism and Cinema,” Colin MacCabe summarized the debate as it crystallized in the mid-1970s:

Most discussions turn on the problems of the production of discourse which will fully be adequate the real. This notion of adequacy is accepted both by the realists and indeed by the anti-realists whose main argument is that no discourse can ever be adequate to the multifarious nature of the real” (1974, 7-8).

According to MacCabe, in 1974 at least, realists and anti-realists both agreed on the issue, adequacy, which in turn depended on an acceptance of the existence of “the real.” At that time one could be a realist by accepting the adequacy of discourse to the real, or anti-realist by rejecting it. Today, however, the trend has been to reject the existence of adequacy altogether, arguing along poststructuralist lines for the collapse of the two terms—“discourse” and “the real”—on whose separation the structure of the original problem was based (it makes no sense to inquire after the adequacy of something that is identical with itself). If the real cannot be accessed because we are agnostic about adequacy, then the proper line of inquiry might begin with the question: what exactly is the problem with adequacy?

Realism-as-adequacy, I think, can be formulated this way: for any representation to count as realistic it must be an “adequate fit” for its object, that is, must have a determined and determinable relationship to something “out there.”⁷ By “determined and determinable relationship” we mean some kind of secure correspondence, symmetry, match, parallel, analogue, reflection and so on (metaphors are unavoidable here), in short, the *identity* between two distinct terms, reality and its representation.

Here I use the term “identity” in its technical dialectical sense, as developed in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* by the philosophers Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno to explain the conceptual operations of Enlightenment rationality. The authors claim to trace this rationality back to Socratic philosophy, which triggered a process of “disenchantment,” the reduction of nature to analyzable component parts (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 3; originally published 1947). As myth was slowly eroded by rational calculation, nature was instrumentalized as

⁷ It is the passage to the “out there” that was cut off by Barthes’ famous claim that there is no reality but the “reality effect” (Barthes [1968] 1989) and that realism is constituted by “code upon code” (1974, 55).

something other than culture, which came to oppose, and dialectical thinking took hold.

Horkheimer and Adorno define “dialectical thinking” concisely as a process by which “each thing is what it is only by becoming what it is not” (2002, 11), producing relentless and virulent divisions between self and other, general and particular, presence and absence. For the sake of clarity I will use “subject” and “object” to refer to the duality of positions that is produced by dialectical thinking in general, but this is just conceptual shorthand for any number of more particular binaries including culture and nature, essence and accident, center and periphery and so on. “Object” could refer to a particular material substance, but at its most general, refers to everything that is not subject, so the exclusions on which the object’s identity is based ought to be understood as multiple.

While dialectical thinking produces separation between abstract, general concepts and sensuous particulars, knowledge consists in unifying them by identifying one with the other (*Identitätsdenken*). “To think is to identify,” Adorno writes, in the first pages of *Negative Dialectics* (1995, 5). When we encounter an object in the world we “identify” it as a such-and-such and not some other kind of thing. This is enormously powerful for science and technology, because it permits classification, by providing general concepts that allow the organization of particular exemplars into utilitarian and functional classes according to practical needs. This is clearly efficacious for human survival in a hostile natural world and Horkheimer and Adorno emphasize that identity-thinking has made us masters of nature, since nature has been reduced to inert matter that is to be used as means for practical human ends.

Although the philosophers acknowledge the efficacy of such rational thought for improving our material welfare, they also worry that identity-thinking produces a kind of violence within Western reason and that the conceptual operation of determinate judgment tends towards domination. In a bold and controversial move, Horkheimer and Adorno claim to see the consequences of identity-thinking not just in philosophy and science, but for the entire process of Enlightenment, which includes democratic institutions and secular thought, but also mass culture, state bureaucracy, capitalist exploitation and state-organized genocide. Just as the plenitude of nature is positioned as alien, inert or meaningless, human populations who are identified as primitive or animal are treated as though they too lacked history, culture, knowledge. Therefore dialectical relationships are ethical ones too, because, as Jacques Derrida also recognized, even simple dualities are “hierarchies in miniature” (Murfin and Ray 1997,

94)—indicators of values, and therefore, of unequally distributed rights, privileges and resources.

This analysis has a number of consequences that will become important to rethinking realism, but first, let me stress two ideas. Although identity-thinking tends towards domination of nature and “other” peoples, its domination is never perfect. This is not a domination that aims at total obliteration but an attempt to make the other like itself (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 247). Identity proceeds by subsumption of a sensuous particular under an abstract universal, which demands the impossible union of two non-identical things. Early in *Negative Dialectics* Adorno writes, “The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy” and “the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived” (1995, 5). The refusal of whatever qualities are not efficacious for identification means that a part of the object is missing for the subject, as if amputated by the cognitive process of abstraction (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002, 9). These missing parts (the “remainder” in the passage above) Adorno calls, following G. W. F. Hegel, “non-identity” or “non-identical” (Nichtidentität, Nichtidentische),⁸ and elaborating what this means is the central task of his philosophical work. The consequence is that every attempt to grasp the object cognitively, every step on the path to absolute knowledge, will fail to arrive at positive results.

Second, it follows that although subject and object appear binary, both terms are impure, or, in Frankfurt School language, “mediated.” This mutual contamination means that subjectivity is not just a “subtractible addendum to objectivity,” as if objectivity were “the pure state that would obtain by eliminating all subjects ” (Adorno 2005, 253; 1995, 270). But while subjectivity cannot be simply subtracted from objectivity, it is not absolutely determining. Just as positive knowledge of objects is impossible, conversely, what is obscure in objects is not absolutely so.⁹ Objects cannot be conceived willy-nilly, but have their own particularity, which stands against subjective cognition, often stubbornly. Accepting the inevitability of the world’s partial

⁸ The question of terminology raises technical problems for interpretation. James Gordon Finlayson argues that the cluster of Adornian terms for what escapes conceptualization, including the nonidentical, the inexpressible (Unsagbare, Unausdrückliche) and the nonconceptual (Begrifflose, Nichtbegriffliche) would be better translated as “ineffable” (2002, 4). I use the term “non-identity” which has become standard in the English-language literature.

⁹ Adorno rejects the noumenal (“thing-in-itself”) posited by Kant as the form of an indeterminate “Something, devoid of qualities” (2005, 254).

concealment, its excess and ultimate unknowability also entails embracing its partial knowability, its plenitude, its perpetual unconcealment. Discarding the dream of objectivity need not therefore entail a hopeless capitulation to fiction and fantasy.

Non-identity does not just include features of objects that are missed or ignored by means-end rationality, it equally refers to alterity of human communities (and Adorno would say, human individuality as well). Given how devastating identity has been for art, philosophy and human rights, we might be tempted to simply get rid of it and start afresh. But as we have seen, Adorno finds little to recommend in this approach. One of the powerful features of his philosophy—despite his consummate modernism—is his refusal to break with the past or to cut the dialectical tension between binaries for the sake of arriving at philosophical “solutions.” To think is to identify.

But although identity cannot be done away with, it can be critiqued (Adorno 1995, 149). In the section of *Negative Dialectic* entitled on “Concept and Categories,” Adorno announces, “[a] thoroughgoing critique of identity reaches towards the preponderance of the object” (*Präponderanz des Objekts*) (1995, 183, translation modified). A thoroughgoing “critique” here does not mean discarding subjectivity but rather revealing the dependence of subject on object. Adorno does this by going to work on the content of the concept of “subject”, and discovering that although subject and object are mutually mediated, this mediation is unequal. He reasons that the subject clearly contains objectivity since any subject, the “I,” is an entity, a being, a something. Still, Adorno warns, “[t]his does not mean that objectivity is something immediate, that we might forget our critique of naïve realism” (*naiver Realismus*) as if we were suddenly beyond dialectical mediation (1995, 184). However, it does indicate that subjectivity, including transcendental subjectivity, affirms objectivity by its very existence. As Brian O’Connor puts it, “subjectivity is incapable of self-generation” (2012, 47) so the preponderance or “priority” of the object indicates both the object’s reality and the subject’s dependence on it.

This philosophical background is the key to unlocking a different understanding of the problem of realism. By re-describing realism as an operation of identity, we can see why reality is epistemologically suspect: not because representation is never objective, but because objectivity is never objective either. This seems a more plausible and productive way of reformulating realism than a self-reflexive fiction that achieves its opposite.

But my goal is not just to offer a better account of the problematic nature of philosophical

realism than could the post-interpretive approaches derived from Michel Foucault or Jean Baudrillard. I also want to explain why, despite everything we know about the media, about representation and about power, we continue to reach for reality at all. Why not be satisfied with our sophisticated critique of representation? Why not just give up on truth? Aside from the very disturbing possibility that we should be content to regard with indifference the question of whether the Gulf War ever took place, the critique of identity suggests an explanation. The critique states that instrumental reason cannot grasp objects without strangling them. But if we can recognize our current epistemological habits as coercive, dominating and colonizing, we can also begin to conceive of an alternative. Concealed within the desire to really, truly, absolutely know the world as it is, is a secret utopian impulse to establish more equitable relations with others—not to make us all the same, but to more fully experience differences without violence. Thus the priority of the object represents a fragile but suggestive way of thinking realism as an experience of what is non-identical, heterogeneous, and different. This is what makes realism not just a problem of epistemology but a problem of ethics. As Bill Brown put it in “Thing Theory,” Adorno grasped the “alterity of things as an essentially ethical fact. Most simply put, his point is that accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such” (2001, 12). Or, in other words, distilled in the epigraph Brown selected from philosopher Michel Serres: “le sujet naît de l’objet.”

But what exactly would a priority of the object be like? How can it be achieved in experience? And more specifically, if this priority of the object is a viable substitute for classical realism in art and literature, the question for aesthetics is: what kinds of objects or experiences would count as realist in this sense? Are all media equally capable of such realism? And what kind of audience does it require?

Adorno’s own comments on this point from an unpublished text, “On Subject and Object,” are both helpful and vague:

Knowledge of the object is brought closer by the act of the subject rending the veil it weaves about the object. It can only do this when, passive, without anxiety [*angstloser Passivität*], it entrusts itself to its own experience. In the places where subjective reason senses subjective contingency [*Zufälligkeit*], the primacy of the object shimmers through:

that in the object which is not a subjective addition.” (2005, 254)¹⁰

This is far from perfectly clear, and we will have to elaborate on these ideas, but for now we can extract the following: object-priority would be a moment of subjective restraint; it would demand trust rather than anxiety; and it would require the subject to experience and presumably tolerate its own “contingency,” that is, recognize its dependence on the object.

Conveniently, Enwezor’s attempt to fold bio-politics into the problem of documentary lends contemporary specificity to the older philosophical account of object-priority in Adorno. The alignment is clearest in the following passage from “Documentary/Verité,” in which Enwezor states explicitly that the content of the concept of truth involves a reciprocal, intersubjective encounter:

The central concern for the other, the being-for-the-other of which Levinas speaks, is the ground for the principle of the intersubjective that governs the communicative principle of an exchange between two people. Therefore, the concept of truth requires first that the other exists in every intersubjective, reciprocal exchange. This is a recognition of the basis of power relations. I do not use the other here in an ethnographical sense. Rather, in the sense of the recognition of one’s own limits in relation to another subjectivized position, be it a text, an artwork, a spoken exchange. The other, then, exists neither as an aberration nor as an opposition. It exists, always, in dialectical relation to multiple modes of subjectivization. (Enwezor 2008, 83)

Although his main reference in this passage is Levinas, Enwezor’s arguments resonate point for point with Adorno’s earlier text. Enwezor’s “concept of truth,” like Adorno’s preponderant object, is not a positive, inert state, but a passage to otherness (or non-identity) through exchange and communication. Enwezor’s use of the strong “requires” emphasizes the importance of intersubjectivity, just as Adorno does with the exclusive condition marked by “can *only* do this when...” (emphasis added). Likewise, where Enwezor insists on a recognition of “one’s own limits” we hear the subjective restraint in Adorno. And Adorno’s description of a subject that “entrusts itself to its own experience” could fit easily into the “fund of trust” that Enwezor sees as necessary for reciprocal relations. Above all, it is clear that both see the object

¹⁰ The original German “Zu Objekt und Subjekt” is included in Adorno’s *Gesammelte Schriften* (Adorno 1977b).

or other not as something opposed to the subject, but rather as a boundary that forms it, and which is reformed with every new experience.

I have been arguing that the problem of realism is not just a problem of representation but a problem of intersubjectivity. This means that realism is not merely a style or linguistic operation but is inescapably social in a strong sense, meaning that it is inescapably political. I am not claiming that realism is *inherently* political, radical or democratic as do some (Baudson 2003, 85); this would make no sense precisely because it is *historically* so—and here we may refer to Courbet's moment or, if we believe O. K. Werckmeister, a brief period in the Soviet Union between 1918 and 1923 (Werckmeister 2002). In any case, seeing realism as a problem of intersubjectivity also means seeing it in a new framework that is not constrained by notions of adequacy or accuracy, which tie up the discussion in unproductive attempts to describe realism as a style (naturalism, say) or a subject matter (workers, or better in the contemporary context, immigrant workers). It also allows us to explain the contradictory push and pull of realism felt among commentators who sense its importance, while maintaining that reality has been swallowed by the sign.

Whatever those concrete features may look or feel like in a work of art, they will not be consistent across time and cannot be formalized for the sake of philosophical propriety. Critical realism does not merely inhere in the work, but is the product of a particular reading, which is sensitive to opacity, boundaries, vulnerabilities, and all the many ways these can appear in visual art. Above all, critical realist art will be that art that gives us an experience of what it is like to encounter one's own subjective limits, or be forced to recognize one's own dependence on an object, or especially, that works against the superiority of the sign by reminding us that the dream of objectivity, whose loss the postmodern subject mourns (or celebrates) is not dead but transformed into a social challenge.

When we examine more closely Jeff Wall's *Diatrobe*, for example, or any number of his large-scale lightbox works, including those lacking human figures, we might experience a paradoxical and not entirely comfortable sensation of having everything—every color, every texture, every volume—fully, even excessively described, even as their parts fail to cohere into a unified whole that would provide any hermeneutic traction. You can add up the parts endlessly, subtract, multiply or divide and yet never arrive at a figure that makes complete sense. Sometimes Wall's evasive pictorial strategies are more obvious, for example, photographing a

figure from behind, denying us access to her expression, or framing an object so tightly that essential information is excluded. In the case of *Diatribes*, it is the camera's position at a comfortable middle distance that proves so maddening: the framing is noncommittal, which leaves us holding onto the intensity generated by the centralized composition and sharp focus, with nothing to hang them on. Even in his most famous works, those modeled after paintings from the European canon, there is a nagging sense that we have a puzzle with a piece missing, an effect that goes beyond the simple ambiguity between "documentary" and "staged." Knowing that Wall rehearses with his models and assembles his pictures from several digital images does not address the weirdness of the finished work, which is neither hyper-real nor surreal but rather adjacent to reality as we know it, both offering up an object to knowledge and giving us a taste of our epistemological limitations, which are bound by identitarian reason.

The term "critical realism" was borrowed from the Marxist philosopher Georg Lukács, who used it in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*.¹¹ For Lukács, in this late work, "critical realism" designated a type of realism distinct from the bourgeois "classical" forms of the nineteenth-century and the socialist art of the Eastern bloc. In Lukács' opinion, which was shaped by the tensions of the Cold War, critical realism was a contemporary Western manifestation of the classical form, whose primary virtue was its ability to represent history as dynamically evolving, and thus, as opening up the possibility of socialism. Like Lukács, I am interested in the complex exchange between social conditions and representation, but I do not follow his attempt to define critical realism as a periodizing or stylistic category. For this reason, no attempt has been made in these pages to undertake a survey of contemporary realist art. Rather I have chosen to focus on artists who developed their mature work in the late 1970s and early 1980s, further limiting my selection to particular projects and works that speak most clearly to the problems of heterogeneity and difference, while continuing a dialogue with a wider realist tradition, as they inherited it. Not every work, therefore, will appear "realist" in the same way, and critical realism as an interpretive approach will be modified on contact with every new object. However, what the artists who appear in this study do share is an anti-expressive tendency to efface themselves in their work—even in autobiographical moments where the artist

¹¹ This text was first written in 1955 and first published in Italian in 1957, under the title (translated) "Present Significance of Critical Realism" and later in German 1958 as *Wider den mißverstandenen Realismus* ("Against Misunderstood Realism") (Lukács 1963).

photographs himself, his family or his friends. I read this as the artist's attempt to convey their own contingency with regard to the objects he/she engages to make his work, so if any part of the artist's self is expressed in the work, it will not be expressed by him, but will emerge obliquely, communicated by his/her political commitments, artistic trajectory over time, or comments about the work.

1.4 CHAPTER OUTLINE

I have selected each of the artists and their particular projects for the way they engage with different aspects of realism. The first chapter concerns realism as materiality, which I examine through the use of the monochrome in the work of Ian Wallace. Wallace has developed a rigorous and instantly recognizable practice of juxtaposing emphatic, single-hued surfaces with photographic prints, generating a playful but optically disorienting encounter between two kinds of reality, one actual surface, the other illusionistic depth. I trace the development of this “bi-form” practice back to Wallace's early conceptual experiments, arguing that they represent the mature formal manifestation of an idea that has long been central to his practice, which he calls the “intersection.” Drawing on the artist's writings, I suggest that the intersection has several uses for Wallace: as a metaphor, as thematic material and as structural device. It is also a “critical realist” strategy because it allows Wallace to explore how different realities encounter and shape each other, without assimilating one into the other or treating this plurality as mere relativism. While developing this work in the early 1980s, Wallace drew on related ideas from *Aesthetic Theory*, explicitly citing the notion of “truth content” as an influence on the development of the mature works. In the final section, I bring Wallace's work in line with Enwezor's concerns, examining a series of more recent conceptual works that use the language of human rights to comment on the colonial history of British Columbia. This last series, *Declarations*, emphasizes the importance of that history to the conflicting material, legal and political realities of indigenous and settler Canadian populations today. It also suggests that the much-maligned humanism and universality of the UN *Declaration of Human Rights* can be mobilized to critique inequality in situations where discourses of difference are used as tools for

oppression—something that is not often considered by discourses that celebrate multiculturalism and heterogeneity.

Chapter 2 explores realism as representation of the social subject through the large-scale “tableaux” photographs of Jeff Wall. Examining social conditions such as marginalization and economic exploitation has long been a realist occupation, particularly associated with the nineteenth-century turn towards “low” subjects like industrial laborers, laundry maids and peasants. But unlike older realisms that could claim the social location of the subject or the proliferation of pictorial detail as proof of their authenticity, I argue that Wall’s realism critiques the “adequacy” paradigm that has structured both older realisms and contemporary accounts. In this chapter, I demonstrate how such a critique can be read in works like *Diatrobe* (1984) that are both highly descriptive and narratively opaque. First, I argue by recreating a history of illegibility, whose features (failure of ekphrasis, heightened detail, and lack of narrative closure) can be read as realist tropes. Here I rely on previous research by Svetlana Alpers, who traced these tropes back to the same seventeenth-century models who influenced Wall, particularly Caravaggio and Velázquez, in a relay that passes through Edouard Manet. Second, I argue from intent, showing that Wall himself understands his work in terms of realism and difference, and that “cinematography,” a term Wall uses to describe his practice, is less about blurring the boundaries between film, photography, and cinema, and more about realizing the ideal of non-identity in aesthetic experience. Finally I return to *Diatrobe*, showing how its illegibility is a staged encounter between subject and object, where the object exceeds the subject’s grasp, and is preserved as an agent of autonomy and self-knowledge.

In Chapter 3 I draw on a model of “constellative” writing to tackle the problem of representing reality that has become complicated recently by the global flows of capital and information. The term comes from Adorno (by way of Benjamin) who believed that dissolving, rather than solving problems, could enact a passage from philosophy to praxis. I suggest that Allan Sekula’s monumental ensembles of images, texts, found objects, slides and audio, can be understood as a kind of critical-realist art that does this. Sekula’s work has long engaged with political subjects in a way that both enacts a critique of the documentary tradition while insisting on the material reality of his subjects—difficult propositions in the context of a mediatized, globalized world. Beginning with an account of *Aerospace Folktales* and moving to *Fish Story*, I argue that Sekula cultivates a complex relationality between subjects and objects, which emerge

multiply entangled with and interdependent on each other, structured along lines of class, gender, geography and history. Using Sekula's interest in the shipping containers as a starting point, I trace in the material and dialectical connections between the maritime economies that fascinated him and the emergence of mass communications technologies that convince us that we exist increasingly in a frictionless, post-industrial, "virtual" world, despite social and ecological warnings about the unsustainability of current arrangements.

In the conclusion I extend these observations to a set of broader arguments about realism, photography and the histories of modern art. If the desire for epistemological access to reality now appears in contemporary art as a desire for a more equitable social arrangement, this allows us to re-read older histories that tried to account for the attraction to realism—in particular, to photographic realism—in new ways. Not only does the literature on the art of the documentary turn appear differently but the concerns with anti-theatricality and photography developed by Michael Fried and the philosopher Stanley Cavell are given an injection of ethical substance. The fantasy of being present to a reality that, however, is not present to its viewer, can be read as implicitly utopian, and therefore, as a protest against an existing social formation. Finally, I explore how this fantasy appears in some recent film and video art, as well as in popular culture more broadly, expressed in dystopian visions of a world in which humanity has destroyed itself, tapping into increasingly pressing questions about ecological stewardship and our collective fate as we anxiously debate development and sustainability.

2.0 IAN WALLACE: REALISM AS INTERSECTION

Rather than asking, “what is real and what is illusion, and how does the artist distinguish or confound the two?” as is common in approaches to reality and realism after the documentary turn, the art of Ian Wallace invites us to ask a different question: How is it possible that several realities exist antagonistically, and yet each is, in its own way, compelling? In this chapter, I describe how Wallace has evolved a rigorous approach that stages encounters between materials, spaces, bodies and traditions, taking care to thematize the differences between them, even as his art retains a qualified, utopian aspiration towards universality. He has termed this approach “the intersection” and the purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate that the intersection essentially describes a visual model for object-priority, and is thus a critical-realist idea.

Interpreters have acknowledged the importance of the intersection as a theme in Wallace’s work (as has the artist himself, most recently with the title of his 2012-2013 retrospective, *At the Intersection of Painting and Photography*, held at the Vancouver Art Gallery). Nevertheless, none have yet linked the intersection explicitly to the artist’s political and social concerns. By reading Wallace’s comments on this concept through the critical theory that he acknowledges has been important to him (including, significantly, *Aesthetic Theory*), we can better understand how the intersection as a motif, structure, and philosophical principle is used a device for accessing what he calls the “social subject” in his art.

Before continuing I must note that Wallace’s deep reading in critical theory predisposes him to handle “reality” and “realism” with caution. He often, but not always, quarantines them in scare-quotes,¹² preferring instead the term “social subject.”¹³ This term can be understood

¹² Reality and realism are often released from orthographic markers when Wallace is speaking of the redemptive promise of art, or of historical catastrophe (for example, Wallace 2000, n. p.; 1990a, n. p.; 1990b, 27-28, 30). He also talks “around” reality, by using substitute phrases like

(safely, I think) to designate, for Wallace, the world outside art and its institutions generally: politics, history, social struggles and the phenomenological texture of everyday experiences. Wallace, like the other artists in this study, attempts to do this while accommodating the powerful anti-realist legacies of modernism, conceptualism and poststructural theory—a difficult proposition. His solution is to pursue an anti-expressive ideal of “classical invention” which entails recombining existing found materials, allowing their structures and histories to encounter each other in new ways, in the hope that they will be enabled to speak about themselves, rather than expressing something about the artist’s inner state.

I will begin with Wallace’s early work, in an attempt to situate his initial articulations of the concept of the intersection within the politicized milieu he encountered as a student at the University of British Columbia in the 1960s. Equally formative were Wallace’s experiences of conceptual and installation art, particularly the art of Iain Baxter (b. 1936), which emphasized social critique, unconventional materials and a disruption of habitual uses of space. Unlike many of his generation, however, Wallace did not give up painting, but rather sought to bring it into contact with the social world that it had long excluded from its surface, by crafting temporary “intersections.” I summarize some such early experiments, which took different forms, for example, turning the monochrome into a quasi-readymade, or, later, using photography as a detection-tool to capture pre-existing intersections embedded in Vancouver’s surrounding urban space.

Turning to the series *Poverty* (1980) and *My Heroes in the Street* (1986), I attempt to show how the juxtaposition of photography and monochrome painting in these large-scale works provided Wallace with a formal structure within which to stage encounters between different registers of reality, and thereby, to address the social subject in a more thoroughly dialectical

“phenomena of the world” (Wallace 2010, n. p.; 2009, n. p.), or an “emblem of reality” (Wallace 2012, 65) in relation to photography’s particular referential qualities.

¹³ For example, Wallace has written: “I was interested in the possibilities of various intellectual discourses and social subjects which could be foregrounded in photoconceptual work but which were limited or absent from minimalist abstraction” (Wallace 1990a, n. p.). Elsewhere he uses “subject matter” or simply “subjects” in a similar sense, as something opposed to the purified aesthetic. For example, “I felt that since monochrome painting did not convey an overt subject, it tended to evoke a vaguely mysterious sublimity and was susceptible to being interpreted in either exaggeratedly mystical or superficially decorative terms, both of which I wanted to avoid” (Wallace 2008c, 86; see also Wallace 2012, 39; 2010, n. p.; 1988, 1985).

way. I also relate these breakthrough series to their art-historical context, suggesting that Wallace deliberately turned to the anti-expressive tradition represented by Piet Mondrian, Andy Warhol and Frank Stella as an alternative to the neo-expressionist styles that had become dominant in the 1980s. His choice is strikingly consonant with Enwezor and Adorno's claims (cited in the introduction) that object-priority would be a moment of subjective restraint. The relational structure of the intersection does not entail greater objectivity in the work, but rather, provides a figure for the subject's dependence on the object. This is particularly true of *My Heroes*, where Wallace achieves a passage between the illusionistic realism of photography, the literal realism of the painted monochrome surface, and the phenomenological and social reality of the exhibition situation. I conclude by considering Wallace's *Declarations*, oft-overlooked linguistic works that use URLs as conduits between the gallery space, virtual space, and the concrete sites of human conflict, explicitly invoking the language of human rights.

2.1 EARLY POLITICS AND THE LIMITS OF THE MONOCHROME

In 1978, the University of British Columbia (UBC) student newspaper took a retrospective look at its own history in a series of articles illustrated by reproductions of past covers. Founded in 1916 as a monthly magazine, *The Ubysey* reflected the gradual politicization of the student body in the course of the 1960s, although, as one writer duly noted, this process began later in Canada than it had in the United States (Gainor 1978, 10). Still, news of Vietnam travelled smoothly from south to north, as did California's emerging hippie and drug cultures¹⁴

¹⁴ Roy Kiyooka (1926-1994), an artist and poet, remembered the transmission of culture on the West Coast as fluid:

The sixties collaged in Vancouver more than it did in any other Canadian city. The geography of the place added to it. Energy up and down the coast between San Francisco, Los Angeles, Vancouver. We used to go down to California all the time. ... It was integrated and that integration gave it a very particular kind of inflection—the whole notion of beautiful Lotus Land which was parodied a great deal at that time.” (Vancouver Art Gallery 1983, 261)

The architect Ian Davidson confirmed this account and provided a rich catalogue of Californian influences:

and *The Ubyyssey* became increasingly left-leaning and ideas-oriented, advocating students' rights and women's liberation while criticizing the Vietnam War and the university administration (Gainor 1978, 17). One of the covers selected for reprint in 1978 featured a photograph of the California social activist Jerry Rubin (1938-1994) with the headline "Prof Club Invaded."¹⁵ The corresponding article told the story of how Rubin led an occupation of the Professors' Club, resulting in concessions from the administration including increased student participation in university governance. (Rubin later became a business investor and multimillionaire.) Other typical articles from 1969 bore headlines such as: "Militant Blacks see US Police State," "University Students Learn to be Little Pigs—SDSer," "Plea Ignored – Canadian Graduates Need Jobs," "Class Warfare Martyrs Commemorated" and "Press exaggerates LSD deaths" (*Ubyyssey* November 7, 1969).

Wallace had been at UBC since 1962, initially as a student of literature. In 1966 he transferred to the art history department for graduate studies. He was not involved with *The Ubyyssey* directly, although the paper supported the activities of the university's arts community, which included Wallace and his circle, by running UBC Fine Arts Gallery programming announcements and reviewing their exhibitions. Such was the case with the exhibition *Four Artists*, which included Wallace, Tom Burrows, Duane Lunden and Jeff Wall,¹⁶ which was advertised in the November 7, 1969 issue, and which elsewhere informed readers of an education initiative on the Vietnam War. All of this activity had a predictable effect on the young UBC art students. Wallace read the English translations of writings by Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno that appeared in *Telos* and the *New Left Review*, filing them away in what would

...environment, free speech movement, the widespread use of drugs, the hippie movement, the new freedom for minority groups in the US, the urge to 'drop-out and turn-on', the explosion of rock music and its culture (clothes, hair speech)—all these ideas and changes largely came from Northern California." (Vancouver Art Gallery 1983, 271)

¹⁵ The original story appeared in October 1968. Harold Rosengarten, then a junior professor of English, was dismayed to see people pouring into the games room. He recalled, "[a]t first, I was mostly afraid for club's new pool table, which had cost members a lot of money. After we secured the room, I went upstairs and watched someone burn a US draft card. It had nothing to do with UBC or Canada, but I guess it was meant as a symbol of radical revolution" (Waugh 2007, 1). Clearly the messages from California were not received with equal sympathy by all UBC members.

¹⁶ The exhibition was organized by Alvin Balkind at UBC's Fine Arts Gallery. It ran from February 3-18, 1970 (Four Artists Exhibition File).

gradually become a substantial personal library. He was also interested in Kazimir Malevich and the Soviet left. In 1970 when finally he had the opportunity to decamp for London, he discovered that many of the same political discussions were going on there too. In spring of 1971, he visited *Art and Revolution* at the Hayward Gallery, where the films of Dziga Vertov made a strong impression.¹⁷ Even today, Wallace remains occupied with the problem of a political art.

In 1966 *The Ubyyssey* published what is probably Wallace's first art review, of a multimedia show presented by San Francisco Tape Music Center. As a record of the exhibition's particulars, "Tapes Foreshadow New Era" is obscure; it is more revealing as a document of the young artist's own ideas. It praised the intermedial practices of the Center, arguing for sound and image technology as a new and legitimate form of artistic expression.¹⁸ The ideas of Marshall McLuhan can be heard, muffled in the background (*Understanding Media* had been published in 1964¹⁹), as Wallace linked the simultaneous experience of sonic and visual stimuli cultivated by the Tape Music Center to contemporary experiments in electronic poetry, dance, and music, citing John Cage and Merce Cunningham. He wrote: "As when simultaneously reading a comic and listening to a radio there is an interplay of independent forces, they exist alone, but at the juncture of a single experience" (Wallace 1966).

This early review reveals an occupation with the intersection, a site where two independent paths cross, a theme that would come to play a major role in Wallace's work and provide the title of his 2012-2013 retrospective at the VAG: *At the Intersection of Painting and Photography*. Wallace seems to have arrived at the idea of the intersection by way of his recent

¹⁷ In conversation with the author, January 16, 2013.

¹⁸ This is a very sophisticated account coming from a *Ubyyssey* student writer. It is striking, not only because of how it anticipates his mature concerns; also striking is how Wallace, struggling to categorize his intermedia or multimedia experience, lands on the term "theatre" (which suggests the Tape Music Center incorporated performance). Feeling the pulse of the earlier avant-gardes, he quotes Antonin Artaud's statement, from 1938: "Theatre... is no Thing, but makes use of everything"—perhaps foreshadowing a major framework that would animate debates over "art" and "objecthood" in 1967 and after (for a modified translation of this passage see Artaud 2010, 7).

¹⁹ The 1964 Festival of Contemporary Arts bore the unofficial title "The Medium is the Message." First organized in 1961 by B.C. Binning, head of the UBC Fine Arts department (and one of the two readers on Wallace's MA thesis), as an attempt at an integrated aesthetic environment, it was the first "the first multi-sensory public happening in Vancouver" (Vancouver Art Gallery 1983, 184).

experience of *Bagged Place* (1966) at the UBC Fine Arts Gallery, a project of the conceptual artist Iain Baxter (now IAIN BAXTER&)—one of Wallace’s early mentors. In this piece, which may have been the first work of “installation art” in Canada (Scott 2012), Baxter confronted Vancouver visitors with an uncomfortable, unnatural environment: a layer of plastic covered the interior surfaces and all objects in a faux apartment, which was itself constructed inside an art gallery.

Significantly, nature was nowhere to be seen. In his account of *Bagged Place*, Lorenzo Buj links the problematic status of nature to another of Baxter’s works, in which the artist signed Canadian banknotes, framing them so that the idealized virgin landscapes on their backs were visible (Buj 2000, 43). A Duchampian gesture, to be sure, but one specific to the Canadian context, since the country is economically dependent on the exploitation of its awesome natural resources, which entails sacrificing long-term sustainability for profits from exports and tourism. Besides failing to flatter Canadian mining and lumber interests, Baxter’s *Suite of Canadian Landscapes* also ran against the older, established tradition of British Columbia art, exemplified by the painting of Emily Carr (1871-1945), which had long exploited the region’s natural beauty for artistic production even as the Pacific northwest was colonized and industrialized. With *Suite* and *Bagged Piece*, Baxter was carrying out a two-pronged critique of aesthetic conventions and entrenched economic policies.

But for the young Wallace, the revelation of *Bagged Place* was not about the loss of nature per se but a clearer picture of humans’ problematic involvement with it. “This is what happens when we move through [Iain] Baxter’s *Bagged Place*, where we are cut off from objects by a film of plastic...” Wallace explained in his review. “[W]e can no longer take our environment for granted; we must realize its independence, and our own independence, and the point at which diverging paths meet” (Wallace 1966). It seems that, from very early on, he was developing a principle for his practice, predicated upon a recognition of and acceptance of the difference between humans and nature (“independent forces”), but also their entanglements (“the point at which diverging paths meet”)—a dialectical idea that resonates with Adorno’s notion of the priority of the object, although Wallace did not yet have access to Frankfurt School texts.

For the moment, Wallace’s political interests in nature did not entail adopting social issues at the level of content. In fact, in 1966, the year of this early art review, Wallace was still making quasi-abstract paintings. Whether any of these early pieces still exist is not clear; none

have been exhibited recently, but he has indicated in writings and talks that they fell within the genres of still life or landscape (Wallace 2008a, 139; 2008b, 82; Wallace and Poggi 2013). Soon he moved away from this style, feeling it was “too conservative” (Wallace 2008b, 82). In early 1967, the same year he began studying art history at UBC, figuration disappeared altogether and the artist began making monochromes. That summer he went to New York, encountering for the first time the work of Donald Judd, Dan Flavin and Ad Reinhardt (Wallace 2005b, 211).

In the late 1960s, making monochrome paintings was not “conservative” but it was also hardly radical. But Wallace’s key frustration with painting was not about its fading avant-garde status, but with its apparent inability to address reality, or, in the artist’s words, to make a “socially significant statement” (Atkinson et al. 1992, 10). There was much that Wallace continued to admire in the modernist tradition, but he felt it was hobbled by its singular pursuit of purity. Over the next few years he explored various alternatives. First, he took the canvas out of the white cube, and then attempted to bring the world into it. Neither of these was the perfect formal solution, but the perfect solution could not be formal in any case. Rather, the formal solution would derive from the idea of the intersection—the place where form could itself assume the task of expressing social content.

2.2 GETTING OUTSIDE THE GALLERY

In the winter of 1967, Wallace’s monochromes took on a narrow rectangular format, which he came to call “slabs” or “planks” (Wallace 2008b, 84). Strictly speaking these were not monochromes. The vertical length of the central field was single-hued and unmodulated, but they were embraced on all sides by painted borders in contrasting colors. In the use of these ribbon-like borders, the closest comparison would be with Jo Baer, who was also painting thin borders around even, white fields at exactly this time. (White fields would not appear in Wallace’s work until 1986, under circumstances that I discuss below.) It is curious that Wallace, who acknowledges his debt to Frank Stella, Barnett Newman and others, never mentions Baer’s work, which is compositionally so similar, although Baer’s canvases always maintained a more

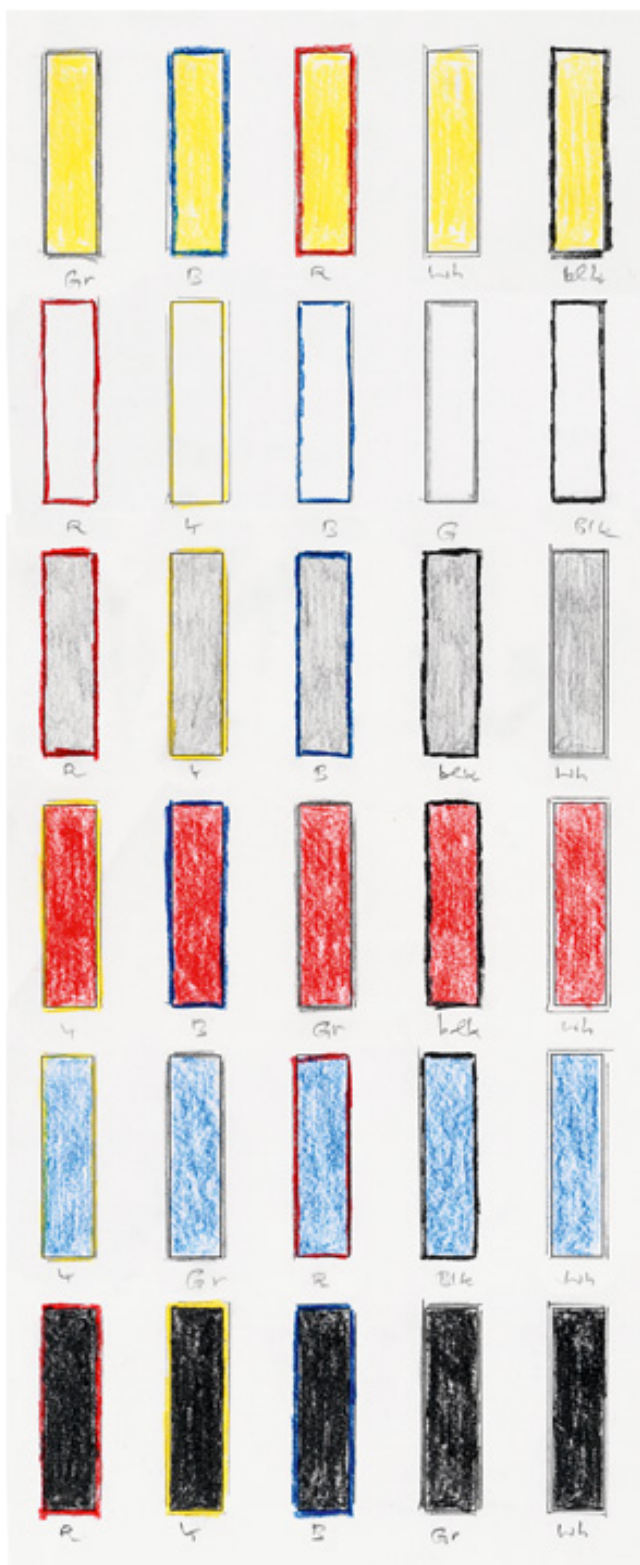


Figure 2 Ian Wallace, *Monochrome Schema*, 1967/2007, ink jet print, 49.5 x 25.4 cm.

conventional aspect ratio.²⁰ Moreover, despite compositional similarities, methodologically, the two artists were worlds apart. Baer's colors were intended to create a luminous optical effect, while the color scheme of Wallace's planks were determined by a system. Wallace restricted his hues to the three primary colors of Piet Mondrian's neoplasticist paintings, plus the basic tonal values white, grey, and black. One of these pigments filled the center and a different one traced the border. Together, this combinatory method produced a series of 30 paintings (blue with white, with grey, with black; yellow with white, with grey, with black, etc.) [fig. 2]. That was the theory, anyway. Only about a third of the series was completed at the time and all have been destroyed over the years, save one.²¹

To some degree, this procedure was as arbitrary as it was rigorous. Wallace had been writing his MA thesis on Mondrian,²² attempting through his research to reconstruct the process by which the older avant-garde artist had arrived at non-objective painting. The choice to restrict his hues to primary colors seems to have resulted from a conscious effort to test Mondrian's reductive procedure in the context of the late 1960s, to see what, if anything remained of it that was viable after minimalism.

I should perhaps pause long enough to acknowledge that the question of realism was a complicated one for Mondrian, who, like Wallace, emerged from a romantic landscape painting tradition that had settled into conservatism, to embrace radical, abstract directions. In his MA thesis Wallace quotes Mondrian's claim, made about his early work: "[f]rom the very beginning, I was always a realist" (quoted in Wallace 1968, 3). A strange claim on the face of it, but hardly unique; in fact it was practically obligatory among early twentieth-century avant-gardes.²³ Of

²⁰ It is possible that he did not encounter her work in the late 1960s, although she exhibited in two group shows in 1967—the same year Wallace visited New York. Accounts of Vancouver during this period emphasize the isolation of its artists: the absence of a network of dealers, galleries and critics, and the heavy reliance on reproductions of works that were being exhibited far away on the East coast (Leider 1967, 4). We can well imagine news traveling irregularly westward.

²¹ *Untitled (Blue Monochrome with White)* (1967) remains in the collection of Robert Kleyn and Helga Pakasaar, Vancouver. (talk at VAG January) The rest were subsequently recreated so the series could exist complete, for an exhibition at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, Vancouver in 2007.

²² He completed his thesis, *Piet Mondrian: The Evolution of Neo-Plasticism, 1910-1920* and received his MA in art history from UBC in 1968.

²³ The European occupation with realisms during the interwar period is well documented (Potts 2013, Kuh 1962). Mondrian published "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality" in *De Stijl* in 1919; Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner penned the *Realistic Manifesto* the following year, criticizing Futurism and Cubism for being optical and superficial, that is, as not having passed beyond

course by “realism” they did not mean a dumb, unreflective *naturalism* but a higher, transcendent realism, which Mondrian believed could be achieved through pure plastic means. Wallace argued that this belief was transmitted to Mondrian from cubism, in particular, from the Section d’Or artists. It was not physical visual reality they sought but rather a

“luminous spirituality” of the primordial structures and relations of objects understood by the probing mind of the art.... Their belief that art is reality as understood by the conceptual faculties and not the visual faculties is quite insistent, the “visual world only becomes the real world by the operation of thought.” (Wallace 1968, 37)

A Kantian idea, in essence, and no more original to Mondrian than his claims about realism. In any case, all this talk of realism and reality merely formed the background. Wallace found Mondrian’s more substantial contribution to modern art elsewhere, in the way his approach differed from expressionism.

In a report outlining his plans for his master’s thesis research, dated July 24 (presumably 1967), Wallace clarified the topic and rationale for his study by distinguishing between two classes of painters who moved towards non-objective styles beginning around 1910: on one side was the lyrical “personal” expressionism of Wassily Kandinsky, František Kupka and Kazimir Malevich, and on the other, was Mondrian, who strove towards a rather different goal of “universal expression.” Wallace found true radicalism in Mondrian’s vision of a universal plastic language that would be internally rational apart from both external appearances and from individual valences of artistic mood—all that was self-expressive, stylized, emotive, and romantic. For Wallace in 1967, this represented an awesome formal accomplishment: nothing less than the answer to “the question of realism and romanticism” (Wallace [1967?]).

Emphasizing the problem of universal forms and structures allowed Wallace to treat Mondrian’s non-objective painting as a transcendence of subjectivity, not as an escape from objectivity into it. Wallace argued:

the crux of Mondrian’s evolution after 1916, and the hard-edge image is only one of the more obvious manifestations of this evolution, is the dramatic shift from his role as an artist who interprets the world and transforms it according to his subjective genius to his

Impressionism. Perhaps the most perplexing fiely to realism during this period was that of Malevich, who wrote “From Cubism to Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting” already in 1916 (republished in Harrison and Wood 2003, 173-83).

role as an artist who manifests (makes obvious) certain self-evident and objective truths of the world that lie outside the personal and emotional domain of the individual human mind. (Wallace 1968, 71)

What Wallace is describing here is not a form of artistic creation whose source is in authentic, individual self-expression, but artistic “invention” (on which more below) whereby the artist or poet strives to be true to things or true to language itself. Mondrian’s approach was unique, Wallace argued, because it “posited a shift from the representation of reality as an object to the representation of reality as a concept expressed through the ‘universal’ means of pure line, color and planar surface” (Wallace 1990, np).

As with the 1966 *Ulysses* review, it would be wrong to put too much weight on this early piece of writing, which reads as a sensitive, but methodologically conventional, formal account of Mondrian’s “evolution.” But, as Wallace recalled later, in an essay written for the catalogue of his commissioned series *Hommage à Mondrian*, he was interested in Mondrian precisely because of the way he had handled the “dialectic between figuration and abstraction” (Wallace 1990, np). If a painting were no longer conceived as a secondary imitation of reality, it need not be conceived as a merely or absolutely subjective interpretation of it either. By discovering the pure formal principles of composition, painting could achieve a different category altogether: the universal.

My argument will not entail a claim that Wallace’s or Mondrian’s compositions are universally intelligible or that they ought to be. The language of universalism and purity was dying already in Wallace’s time and it is utterly foreign to postmodern ears. I will pick up the problem of how to characterize Wallace’s anti-expressionism later in my discussion, but what interests me presently about the “plank” monochromes (actually bi-chromes) from 1967-1968 is what possibilities their rectangular format presented to an artist who was becoming increasingly frustrated with the state of late-modernist painting. Even as they explored the legacy of early abstraction, at the same time the planks adhered to another, different “reduction” as suggested by conceptual art, which had nothing to do with purity and everything to do with rigorous systems and procedures. In fact, Dan Graham had already explored a “found” modular color-combination system almost exactly like the one Wallace developed, in *Homes for America* (1966). If an object could be made by a set of instructions and yet still qualify as a work of art, then the role of the artist and categories of aesthetics would have to be radically rethought. At the same time this

raised another, potentially troubling idea: if an art object could be determined in advance by a set of instructions, why fabricate it at all?

While from the perspective of conceptual art, making objects was starting to seem arbitrary, in other quarters making arbitrary objects had come to represent a mortal threat to art itself. From the perspective of late modernism, the tall and narrow “plank” format appeared strongly object-like. Indeed, this is exactly how Wallace saw it himself. Almost four-and-a-half times tall as they were wide, the plank paintings squeezed the pictorial field, making it difficult, if not impossible, to see the canvas as a frame or window onto pictorial space. The effect of compressing the format was to render these paintings, in Wallace’s words, “quasi-sculptural.” This is important for my account, because it seems this format provided a minor breakthrough: rather than being “hung” on a wall these paintings could be “placed” in a space like minimalist sculpture. (John McCracken’s vertical, leaning plywood planks covered in plexiglass and resin, produced around the same time, are morphologically similar). Having recognized the object-status of the paintings within the gallery situation, Wallace took the next logical step, and went outside the gallery, to see how the paintings appeared in the company of other objects. As he put it in his retrospective account: “I wanted to devalue their position as hieratic art objects and extend their presence into the more ambient social landscape” (Wallace 2008b, 84). In other words, he hoped to craft a point of intersection.

Throughout 1968 he exhibited these works four times. One of these, in May, was a two-person show with Duane Lunden, nominally held at the Simon Fraser University Gallery, although neither artist placed any work inside the gallery itself. Instead, Wallace installed the work in liminal places, such as stairwells (Wallace 2008b, 84) and Lunden affixed his pieces to the building’s exterior. Photographic documentation testifies the oddness of this strategy. For example, Wallace’s untitled blue and white monochrome painting appears in hallway or stairwell (impossible to tell which), sandwiched between an exit sign on the right and a window on the left [fig. 3].

The exit sign bore a red arrow pointing directly at it and Wallace no doubt enjoyed the joke in this conjunction. From the camera’s position, the painting blocked access to the exit while alluding to the magical ability of Yves Klein’s optically disorienting blue monochrome surfaces to dissolve and open a space of indefinable depth. In another photograph from the same exhibition, *Untitled (Black Monochrome with Red)* (1967) hangs on an exposed concrete wall at

the landing of a staircase. The pock-marked, concrete surface, identical in tone and texture to the one in the previous photograph, is sharply dated to the austere campus architecture of the 1960s. This plank painting was hung very close to the ceiling, with a gap of only about two inches, giving it a decorative quality, an accessory not unlike the light fixtures beside it or the indoor plants beside. With the plank paintings, Wallace had forced the issue of objecthood, and yet, by taking the work outside the gallery space, the paintings, however devalued, nevertheless continued to do what modernist painting does, that is, hang on the wall and offer itself to contemplation. It is possible no one took these particular paintings up on the offer. But then again, there are few guarantees about how museum and gallery audiences will respond to artwork anyway.

If the impressions of Vancouver Art Gallery assistant curator Marguerite Pinney are at all representative, the placement of these pieces powerfully emphasized the paintings' object-status in exactly the way Wallace had anticipated. Reviewing the show for *Artscanada*, she reported that "[e]ssentially, they remain objects in space." Using the phenomenologically-inflected language of minimalism, Pinney read the planks as both containing their own "inner universe" bounded by the painted borders, and also "passive" and "contemplative" canvases whose vulnerability to their circumstances confirmed their existential (or anthropomorphic) presence and vitality. "Complete, yet completed by each other, by sunlight or shadow, day or night, they are gazed on, passed by, give pleasure, displeasure, *have life* and in turn affect their surroundings" (Pinney 1968, 34).

Curiously, Pinney eases her way through the language of minimalism and objecthood without showing any compulsion to occupy the normative territory carved out the previous year when Michael Fried drew the line between literal art and anti-theatrical modernism. Notably, Wallace writes and speaks in this open-ended manner way too. He was impressed by Michael Fried's writing from the mid-1960s (2012, 44; 2008, 142;) and he read "Art and Objecthood" when it appeared in *Artforum* in 1967, yet, if the plank paintings are any indication, he read the text without any of its censoriousness, absorbing Fried's targets as just more possibilities on the horizon of contemporary art. A 1970 press release prepared by the UBC Fine Arts Gallery for *Four Artists*, declared: "He [Wallace] likes to call his pieces objects because they are neither paintings nor sculpture—meaning that they are not governed by the aesthetic and critical laws of either" (Press Release 1970).



Figure 3 Ian Wallace, *Untitled (Blue Monochrome with White)*, 1967, acrylic on canvas, 29 x 51 cm. Collection of Robert Kleyn and Helga Pakasaar. Installation view at Simon Fraser University Art Gallery, Burnaby, 1968.

By what aesthetic and critical laws, then, ought they to be governed—or assessed? It seems clear enough that understanding the plank pieces cannot be complete within the normative

framework of New York debates. It is true that Wallace continued to orient his work to the problems of modernist painting (flatness, composition, anti-theatricality, autonomy generally). But the plank paintings and other works from the late 1960s and early 70s reveal something else: Wallace's commitment to test the limits of the medium not from within, but, as it were, from without. This was not exactly modernist; on the established Greenbergian view formulated in "Modernist Painting" Wallace's commitment would have registered as an Enlightenment throwback:

The self-criticism of Modernism grows out of but is not the same thing as the criticism of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment criticized from the outside, the way criticism in its more accepted sense does; Modernism criticizes from the inside, through the procedures themselves of that which is being criticized. (Greenberg [1960] 2001, 755)

Wallace's choice to exit the gallery was not unusual; he was but one among a generation of artists that pioneered earth works, performance, language art and site-specific installation. And yet his ongoing commitment to painting while doing this was unusual indeed. Rather than repudiate the validity of modernist accomplishments and institutions, he sought to bring these into contact with the world outside, to carve out a new space between Greenberg's aging program and autonomous art (symbolized by the tableau), sacrificing the former so the latter could be saved.

Today, Wallace's commitment to painting remains strong enough to furnish an artistic identity,²⁴ so much so that one might characterize it as a *faith*, which would explain why the auto-critique of painting could be abandoned without much fuss. If painting persists as a utopian ideal, closer to a guiding principle rather than a normative claim about historically particular conventions, then "painting" was not threatened at all. Its reality was still in the future, waiting to be realized. Projecting backwards, we might say its ideal status gave the young Wallace permission to deviate from its canonical forms, knowing that it would be there, all the while, waiting.

²⁴ "I was a painter. And, in some ways, I still am a painter" Wallace said (quoted in Atkinson et al. 1992, 10).

2.3 INVENTION, NOT EXPRESSION

I have argued that placing the plank paintings outside the gallery at SFU represented an early attempt to address the reality of everyday life by taking art out into the world, making it vulnerable to its surroundings, and ultimately discovering that it did not collapse into them. But almost immediately, as Wallace began realizing this idea, he was struck by the Duchampian notion of reversing this strategy and bringing the stuff of the everyday into the white cube. In both cases, I suggest, Wallace sought to stage an encounter or “intersection” between the art and the everyday, first exploring this hybrid space from inside out, and then, from outside in.



Figure 4 Ian Wallace, *Untitled (Plank Piece)*, 1968; wood, vinyl; dimensions variable. Installation view at the Musée des beaux arts, Montréal.



Figure 5 Ian Wallace, *Untitled (White Line)* 1969/2012; wood, acrylic paint; 5 planks, 243.8 x 24 x 2 cm.

In 1968 Wallace stopped painting monochromes in favor of using standard-sized wood planks and other building materials (timber derived from the British Columbian forests pictured on the back of Baxter's framed bills). With these he formed minimalist sculptures and interventions into the landscape. The "sculptures" were less unified objects than open, variable configurations. In one series, planks were laid in rows on the floor and covered with flexible sheet of clear plastic [fig. 4]. Despite the abstraction of this procedure, the resulting configurations' morphological similarity to the stretcher and canvas achieved a weak but surprisingly lucid figurative effect. In other *White Line* pieces (first made 1969) he covered long strips of wood with white paint, laying them out end to end to create a Barnett Newman-like "zip" across the land, not unlike the painted lines on asphalt that separate lanes of traffic [fig. 5] or the narrow raised boardwalk leading to the Mudflat squat, near the beach where the work was first installed.

Wallace also explored the found materials of the media. The critical work in this context is *Magazine Piece* (the first version of which was installed in late 1969). As with the monochrome plank paintings, this piece derives from a schema [fig. 6], dictating that the pages

of a magazine are to be taped onto the wall in lines, from left to right, until the pages run out.²⁵ The effect is a mural-like grid of magazine pages, their chaotic mix of image and text and various layouts all simultaneously visible (at least on one side—the left-hand page of every spread will be facing the wall, like the monarch’s portrait on Baxter’s framed bills. In both pieces, one side remains invisible as a condition of visibility). The choice of magazine is left up to the curator in each instance and discarded once the exhibition is over. Consequently, each of the magazine installations will be geographically and temporally particular.

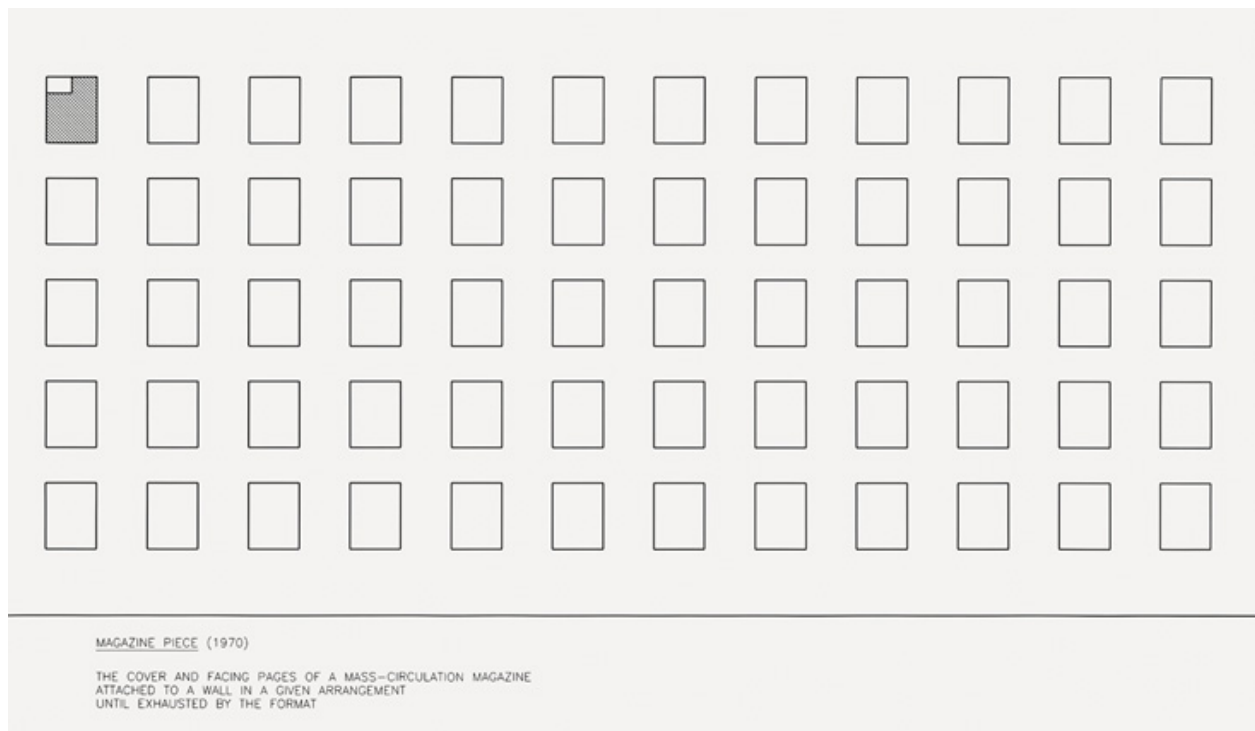


Figure 6 Ian Wallace, *Magazine Piece Schema*, 1970, ink on vellum, 61 x 106.6 cm.

As a way of introducing current affairs or contemporary fashion into the sacred, timeless space of art, Wallace’s method was crude. However, the crudeness of printed matter has a respectable place in the lineage of historical avant-garde art. Mass-circulation, glossy magazines

²⁵ The schema states: “The cover and facing pages of a mass-circulation magazine attached to a wall in a given arrangement until exhausted by the format” (dated 1970). The statement is illustrated by a grid of rectangles, with the top left one marked as the title page [fig. 7]. Strikingly similar was Ira Joel Haber’s *Presidents of the United States*, a book piece installed by tearing out the pages and tacking them up on the wall with masking tape. Haber’s piece was included in *Information*, curated by Kynaston McShine at the Museum of Modern Art, 1970. Gustav Metzger’s more recent *Historic Photographs* also “hung” magazines in a similar, gridded configuration (Carrion-Murayari and Gioni 2011).

are descendants of the *journals* of Pablo Picasso's and Georges Braque's own time, and they mobilize the powers of non-autonomous signs much like the readymade faux-bois wallpapers, sheet music and labels once did.

Christine Poggi has traced *Magazine Piece* to the grids of Stella and Mondrian, to the papier collé of Picasso and Braque, and to Stéphane Mallarmé's games of chance (Poggi 2012). (*Un coup de dés* represents a major, lifelong occupation of Wallace's.) Poggi notes the perhaps contradictory nature of these divergent references, since Mallarmé disparaged the popular press, singling out the rigidity of the newspaper columns whose format Wallace's piece loosely mimics. However, as Poggi explains in an earlier essay, "Mallarmé, Picasso, and the Newspaper as Commodity", symbolism and collage do converge around a particular notion of originality (Poggi 1989). This was not grounded in authentic self-expression or a demiurgic creation from nothing but was something more akin to a "classical theory of invention" that entails a recombination of familiar or conventional parts. As Poggi explains: "originality derives from the imaginative manipulation of conventional signs, rather than from a spontaneous encounter between self and nature" (1989, 184).

This point of convergence between two otherwise conflicting aesthetic dispositions is exactly where Wallace picks up their example for his own work. So although the collage qualities of *Magazine Piece* may run "against the grain" of Mallarmé's purist aesthetics it also is consistent with the poet's anti-self-expressive aesthetic. Mallarmé believed that language could become pure poetry if the poetic subject managed to get out of the way—after of course having removed words from their instrumental uses. Mallarmé wrote, in *Crise de Vers*:

The pure work implies the elocutionary disappearance of the poet, who cedes the initiative to words, brought into collision by their mobilized inequality. They illuminate themselves through reciprocal reflections like a virtual swath of fire sweeping over precious stones, replacing the audible breathing in ancient lyric poetry or the personal and passionate control of the phrase. (Quoted in Poggi 1989, 187)

It is significant, I think, that Mallarmé qualifies the pure work as a "collision" of "mobilized inequality"—terms not dissimilar from Wallace's notion of the intersection, which likewise demands an encounter between independent forces—and does so to cultivate his poetics of impersonality. It also shares something with Mondrian's commitment to universality of plastic means, which just goes to show how contradictory notions of universality and purity really were.

After all, if by restraining subjectivity we get closer to a “pure” state (of poetry, of scientific observation, of phenomenological reduction) then we also submit to the existing flow of a very impure world, already contaminated by history and clogged with signs. If the claim of Wallace’s MA thesis was at all correct, and Mondrian had indeed succeeded in reconciling the contrary impulses of romanticism and realism, then the success was qualified by the ongoing battle between the monochrome and the readymade which had intensified with the recent (re)emergence of the neo-avantgarde during Wallace’s student years.

As he worked between the spaces of high art and the everyday, drawing on various anti-expressive models, the notion of the intersection remained stuck in Wallace’s thinking. A quasi-manifesto from 1969, entitled “The Literature of Images” describes a multifaceted art practice that would embrace the latest developments in neo-avantgarde art, by thinking of them all as inflections of the larger sphere of media that shape them, just as individuals are structured by systems of signs. This is a challenging text, written in a loose, speculative and associative style (probably under the influence of beat poets,²⁶ Burroughs especially) so it is difficult to extract a single thesis statement. But there are hints of Wallace’s itch to get outside the mute, impassive monochrome surface by way of the intersection, which now takes on an explicitly material-philosophical character. Towards the end of the text he considers the “corporeal factors” and “concrete effects” of the density of media in our environments, acknowledging the interactions between particular subjects and discursive formations, mediated by signs. “I am only interested in the fact of the image, as an intersection point in my consciousness” Wallace wrote, aphoristically. “A philosophy that recognizes the primary notion that the world is real, physical material. A philosophy of materialism” (Wallace 1969, n. p.).

²⁶ Allan Ginsberg’s *Howl* (1955) was warmly received in Vancouver, spawning an energetic beat scene, with several “beantnik joints” (cafés, bookstores). Wallace would have known several of the figures involved, since poets and painters mixed freely, several artists had visual and literary practices, and many, like Wallace, were interested in socialism and concrete poetry (Turner 2012). In 1968 Wallace contributed cacophonous Dada-inspired collages to bissett’s *blewpoint magazine* and worked briefly at bissett’s Mandan Ghetto gallery on West 4th Avenue (Simpson 2013). Later he contributed an essay to the exhibition catalogue for *Concrete Poetry: An Exhibition in Four Parts*, which was held at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 1969 (Wallace 1969).

2.4 EARLY PHOTOGRAPHIC WORK

By the fall of 1970 in the lead-up to the *Four Artists* exhibition, Wallace had been trying his hand at photography and film, but his experiments had not yet congealed into a coherent approach to the medium. Following the example of Dan Graham's *Homes for America* (1966) and Jeff Wall's *Landscape Manual* (1969), which had been included in *Four Artists* (Four Artists Exhibition File 1970), Wallace had begun making rough photographs while driving and walking around Vancouver. He was stimulated, in large part, by an invitation from Christos Dikeakos to participate in *The Photo Show*, which ran from December 1969-January 1970. Wallace has used the opportunity to display what he identified retrospectively as his "first photo work": a binder of about 100 photographs in plastic sleeves, mounted on a plinth (Wallace 2005b, 213). His photographs from 1969-70 are observational frames of Vancouver's streets, moving cars, the metro, and casual portraits of his friends and fellow artists, and, appropriately enough, several intersections with their abstract gridded lines, separating pedestrians and traffic as they move through the city.

All were roughly made, without consideration for the "fine art" tradition of long tonal range, perfect print-quality and quarter-inch white borders. Lack of polish a signature of contemporary conceptual practices that regarded photography primarily as a documentary, rather than as an expressive, tool. Wallace recognized that this documentary quality was lacking in painting. Reflecting on his transition to photography, Wallace emphasized the importance of social and political reality:

For me the primary question was how to bridge the gap between the radical effect of the anti-image of the monochrome and the literalist materialism of the sculptural work with the need to address the subjects of modern life and those intellectual and political issues that were seminal to the discourses of the late 1960s. (Wallace 2008, 90)

One of these early photo-works was made outside the Pan American World Airways ticket office while he was in London in 1970 [fig. 7]. For *Pan Am Scan*, Wallace took a series of shots in rapid succession, scanning his camera from left to right, exhibiting the horizontal frames in a strip of photographs on the wall, staggered from top to bottom. Each "step" in the strip is positioned so as to pull the five photographs together in an overall unified composition. For example, vertical elements align (a pillar continues from the bottom photograph into the one



Figure 7 Ian Wallace, *Pan Am Scan*, 1970, 5 silver gelatin prints, each 32.2 x 47.6 cm. Collection of the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver.

above it; the doors are aligned, as are the reflections in the windows). Compositionally, then, the

grid is still present. It is a beguiling sequence, moving us from an interior to an exterior space. As the reflective surfaces are gradually eliminated from the frame with each photograph, we seem to pass from an environment of chaotic, jumbled, overlapping reflections, signs and movements where it is hard to read interior space from the exterior reflections, to the clarity of the bright street.

In a *Study for Pan Am Scan* [fig. 8], Wallace collaged one of the frames from *Street Reflections*, another work in a similar format, together with three illustrations from newspaper advertisements showing a tape deck, a “telephone amplifier” and a bed. An inscription reads: “Image concerning the interface between reality” and “hard surface” (with an arrow pointing to the left-hand side of the photograph, showing the street) and “soft surface” (with an arrow pointing to the reflections in the store-front window). The “hard surface” side shows a bright, busy street with two men talking and walking towards the camera without noticing it. Their reflection is overlaid and confused with those of other pedestrians, a passing tram and of course, the window dressing. Broken, softened and barely visible through the glass, is the image of a mannequin, posing in a shorts and tank-top, as a sign of the frozen, ideal feminine beauty of consumerism. The reflective storefront window as a dreamworld of desires and fantasies was a motif already explored earlier in the twentieth century by Eugene Atget and Walker Evans. But Wallace, in these pictures, appears less interested in the storefronts as such than in their relationship to the objects and events on the street.

Within the bifurcated compositions of *Pan Am Scan* and *Street Reflections* we can observe early hints of how an intersection might be produced from within a single work. In *Street Reflections* the large, reflective windows form a surface where reality becomes image but they do not form a continuous space with the reality of the street. The difference is emphasized by the ways that space appears on either side of the composition. On the left, Wallace looks down a long stretch of sidewalk from below a wide overhang, so that the disappearing street and its diminishing figures plunges into deep space, driven by the orthogonal lines above and below. By contrast, the reflections that play on the storefront window appear rather flat, creating a layered, almost cubist surface and blocking access to the space behind it. Similarly, the sequence of *Pan Am Scan* ends on a photograph divided vertically into two unequal sections: the left is almost entirely occupied by a thick, black column pressed up against the picture plane and the right shows the street, once again moving into the space behind the picture plane at a strong

diagonal. In this early photographic work, the juxtaposition of the unmodulated, monochrome surface and the depth of the photograph that would later become Wallace's "signature," is already, subtly present.

Image concerning the interface between
hard surface / soft surface reality
↓ ↓



re Panam Scan

Figure 8 Ian Wallace, *Study for Pan Am Scan*, 1970, silver gelatin print, collage on paper, 33 x 29.9 cm. Collection of Lesley Stowe and Geoffrey Scott, Vancouver.

2.5 TURNING POINT: POVERTY AND THE INFLUENCE OF ANDY WARHOL'S "BLANKS"

I have been arguing that Wallace's artistic trajectory was driven early on by a desire to address the "social subject" in a way that would build on the latest, most critical neo-avantgarde and conceptual experiments while retaining the aesthetic quality and affective power that he associated with older art, particularly painting. Photography suggested one possible path out of the gallery and into the "real" world, but Wallace was reluctant to leave the scale and drama of painting behind. Throughout the 1970s, Wallace's solution was to stage and photograph tableaux using friends or fellow artists as models. These scenes were printed at a scale unusual for the period, then hand-colored, which lent the prints an artificial complexion, intensifying the mediated quality of the image. Some of the overpainting loosely mimicked local color (*La melancholie de la rue* [1973], *The Summer Script I and II* [1973-74] *The Constructor* [1976], *An Attack on Literature* [1979], *Lookout* [1979]), while in other pieces each print took on an overall tinted cast (*Colours of the Afternoon* [1978-89], *l'Après-midi* [1977-79], *Image/Text* [1979]). Wallace hung the hand-colored prints in a frieze-like row, so that the finished work was caught between the filmstrip and painting and suggested a loose narrative sequence.

In 1980 he contrived one of these staged scenarios for a film work entitled *Poverty*, which subsequently generated a sprawling, complex family of objects in many formats and media over the course of the next seven years.²⁷ The majority of these were based on eight gelatin silver prints of frames pulled from the original 16mm film [fig. 9]. Among them was a suite of paintings produced in 1982, which were the first of Wallace's pieces to juxtapose photography with monochrome painting—an approach that would become the foundation of his mature practice. For this reason, *Poverty* represents a turning point in Wallace's work, but, I will argue, does not constitute the formal solution that would finally allow him to articulate the

²⁷ A self-produced catalogue of work from 1967-81 includes under the *Poverty* series a book, a 16mm film, a series of 10 images in black-and-white and color, a folio of eight black and white photos, a book of color Xerox plates, 11 photo murals (approximately 3 x 4 feet each), and a folio of 8 original photos mounted cards, in an edition of 3 (Wallace 1981b). Several of objects from the *Poverty* project were included in his 2012 VAG retrospective, including a lithograph and the 1981 photocopied artist's book.

elusive social subject he had long sought.



Figure 9 Ian Wallace, *Poverty*, 1980, eight gelatin silver prints of frames pulled from the original 16mm film, each 13 x 17.8 cm. Promised Gift to the Vancouver Art Gallery from Rick Erickson, Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver.

Poverty: the title cues us to expect images of poor people and the prints deliver, more or less. These are not the poor or homeless from Vancouver in 1980, but rather Wallace's friends dressed up and posing as "models" of poverty, in imitation of images received from the history of photography, particularly from Thomas Annan, Charles Nègre or Jacob Riis. The row houses—or what passes for them²⁸—stoke our expectations about urban overcrowding, lack of sanitation, orphans and so on, while the suits, hats and full skirts relocate us in an undefined "pastness." The set is populated by familiar types: in one frame we see the waif in ill-fitting clothes picking her way through a pile of trash; in another, a hobo rests in the slight protection of some bushes. People loiter on the streets. The deliberate posing of the models and the thickness

²⁸ The setting was the old Canadian Pacific Rail warehouses in False Creek, Vancouver (Wallace and Douglas 2013). This is not marked in any way within the images themselves.

of the medium appear to bury Wallace's poor within the long-standing photographic conventions governing their representation; as a result, *Poverty* doesn't so much *adhere* to these codes as *exhibit* them in a way that strips them of their claims to represent reality. Not only do the black-and-white stills fail the authenticity test on all fronts, it is clear they never took it seriously anyway: they are playing by the new rules of postmodernism. By choosing not to hide any of this, the artist tips his hand; he is in on the joke. By exaggerating the masquerade, the mask becomes visible as such, which raises the question as to whether these can be said to be images "of" poverty and further, whether this question even makes sense any longer in the context of Wallace's interventions.

Complicating the issue was Wallace's decision in 1982 to silkscreen these motifs with colored ink onto vertically-oriented, monochrome canvases. The silkscreened images were much smaller than the overall dimensions of the canvas, so they floated in the center of their colored fields, which Wallace had painted in a variety of lush hues. When in the summer of 1982 the suite of these canvases was exhibited at the David Bellman Gallery in Toronto,²⁹ it triggered a range of reactions from the critics, all of whom however were clearly uneasy with what they perceived to be a problematic aestheticization of the subject. Due to its purported subject, *Poverty* seemed both unavoidably, obviously political and yet, after being run through Wallace's aesthetic procedure, only tenuously so.

On June 26, the same day the exhibition closed, *The Globe & Mail* published a review by the art critic John Bentley Mays. *Poverty*, Mays reported, had sparked some controversy: "The nub of the tiff, it seems, is Wallace's employment of images of poverty in these handsome paintings—a transgression, I take it, against the moral code of some of Toronto's recently politicized artists and critics" (Mays 1982, 9). Mays could not follow this argument, not because he disagreed with its ethical core, but because he felt the ethical issues were not relevant in this case. For Mays, artist and the title of the work were extrinsic to the work itself, which did not depict figures he could comfortably identify as "poor." Considering the heavy processing of the

²⁹ According to the Vancouver curator and critic Scott Watson, the full suite of paintings comprised 20 canvases, rather than the original 8 motifs pulled from the 1980 film project (Watson 1993; 2013). This is consistent with Mays' review (Mays 1982), but contradicts Rhodes' assertion that at Bellman gallery at least, only 16 canvases were exhibited (Rhodes 1982).

images and the monochrome surface areas, Mays declared, “[t]he nature of art-making, not a social issue, is the central concern of this work” (9). Consequently, the Toronto complaints about Wallace’s treatment of poverty could only be moot or incoherent.

The following September, Richard Rhodes, another Toronto writer, published a retrospective response to Mays’ comments in *Vanguard*, a publication of the Vancouver Art Gallery. Rhodes noted the obvious staginess of the *Poverty* pictures, accepting their playful mise-en-scene as a postmodern game of allusion. But the more substantial use of the poverty motif was metaphorical, Rhodes argued, a comment on the decrepit state of painting itself. Here he agreed with Mays’ assessment that this was art about art, but disagreed that there was no politics to it. The “poverty” in question, for Rhodes, was “the poverty of any rhetoric” whether left or right, a refusal of politics after the failed experiments of the twentieth-century that was a negative, but still minimally social move. “That’s the social content I see in the work. If he [the artist] wants to call that poverty, fine” Rhodes wrote (1982, 26).

These critics’ sensitivities are evidence of the difficulty Wallace had in transmitting the social reality of his subject through a form of painting so refined and distinguished it was practically emblematic of aesthetic autonomy. Although “poverty” is an eminently, even crudely, social and economic subject, it appeared, it seems, too tightly fused to the work as art, for it to have any reality of its own. At the same time this made for an awkward politics, since by 1982 art could hardly secure its avant-garde credentials except by way of a critique of aesthetics or of representation or, at best, of both. In the background of the critics’ objections to treating *Poverty* as a political work is the position sharply articulated in Martha Rosler’s influential essay, “in, around and afterthoughts (on documentary photography)”, published around the same time as Wallace was working on *Poverty*. Documentary, Rosler argued, is organized to valorize the individual photographers who have struggled to “humanize” their subjects, which is both conservative in its celebration of the individual creative subject (which in turn tacitly reinforces the image of a passive, helpless subject) and in its refusal to see bodies as occupying structured and unequal subject-locations that have been historically produced (Rosler 1989). In *The Bowery in Two Inadequate Descriptive Systems* (1974-1975) Rosler proposed one possible solution to this problem, which required exiling bodies from the frame altogether. *The Bowery*

addresses itself to semiotic systems alone, almost placing a taboo over the portrayal of oppressed human subjects.³⁰

But even a sympathetic reading would struggle to see Wallace as following Martha Rosler with his own—larger and more colorful—decoding. Largeness and color-saturation are aesthetic features that strongly suggest the alternative possibility that rather than enacting a mutual critique of photography and painting, *Poverty* is doing the opposite: mutually affirming both traditions in some unspecified way.

In a catalogue essay written for Wallace's exhibition at La Maison de la Culture de Saint-Etienne in 1989 Jeff Wall, like Rhodes, partially excused *Poverty* by tracing its contradictions back to the social field from which it emerged. Wall negotiated the problematic aestheticization of poverty by acknowledging its conservative stance while placing it in a tradition of radical modernist refusal, as evidence of a Symbolist retreat rather than a radical's combative resistance to unjust, intolerable social arrangements. *Poverty* "is organized as a crisis, not a triumph" he argued. "The monumental composure of Wallace's work of the past few years rests comfortably on the cushion of restoration. That composure is vexed by polemic, its memory," he wrote (Wall 1988, 22). On Wall's view, the idyllic photographic scenes are not there to ease our anxieties about structural inequality and the ethics of the liberal gaze, but to remind us of the weak transcendent power of blankness and refusal. For Wall, this melancholy divided Wallace from the critical and more explicitly anti-liberal antagonism of Rosler's text. It is an important observation, because it explains why elements of Wallace's work appeared conservative in the context of the 1980s, even as it links those same elements to a critical legacy of modernist autonomy, that is, the legacy of critical theory (Wall 1988, 16).

Wall also catches something Wallace's other critics missed, the hinge connecting his aesthetics of withdrawal to the ideological critique of representation: Andy Warhol.³¹ In developing *Poverty*, Wallace borrowed two key features from Andy Warhol: the use of

³⁰ Rosler called her photo-text work an "act of refusal." This characterization powerfully influenced later interpretations, which emphasized blankness, anti-expressionism and critique of representation (Edwards 2012, 6-19).

³¹ Wall may have been particularly attuned to this influence, not only because he was personally acquainted with Wallace, but because he had been teaching an undergraduate seminar on Warhol in 1979. His notes were later the basis of an essay published in 1995 as "Some Sources for Warhol in Duchamp and Others" (Wall 1995).

silkscreen to layer a photographic element over an unmodulated monochrome field, and the choice to leave large sections of the painting blank so that only the flat color was visible. Several of Warhol's "disaster" paintings from 1963 use this bi-form format; *Orange Car Crash* is the first documented work to use a separate, matching monochrome canvas for this purpose. Appropriately enough, Warhol called these "blanks" and it is evident that they caused difficulty throughout the 1960s, since they were rarely reproduced in illustrations, perhaps regarded by photo editors and publishers as superfluous or meaningless.³²

Scholarship has not settled on a definitive interpretation of the blanks. Alain Jouffroy, the French writer and artist who contributed a text to the catalogue for Warhol's 1964 exhibition at Sonnabend Gallery in Paris, felt that the blanks contributed something existential to the subject matter, as he put it, "a moment of truth lived in the absolute" (Frei and Printz 2002, 331). Warhol's own comments characteristically deflected any lingering existential or tragic readings. The MoMA wall card accompanying *Orange Car Crash 14 Times* (also reproduced on the museum's website), includes this flip comment on the double-canvas strategy: "The two are designed to hang together however the owner wants. . . . It just makes them bigger and mainly makes them cost more" (Warhol, quoted in MoMA 2008). In any case, the duality of this bi-form format was close to Wallace's interests. As Wall observed in his essay, "A more precise formulation of the polarity between polemical imagery and the ambiguity of the monochrome could hardly be imagined" (Wall 1988, 16).

Wallace had been aware of the importance of Warhol's work since 1960s, but in *Poverty* the significance of a dialectic in Warhol's work registered as a direct formal influence. Wallace saw Warhol's *Orange Car Crash* (1963) in 1981 at *Westkunst – Zeitgenössische Kunst seit 39*, which he reviewed for a Vancouver-based arts magazine.³³ Wallace's comments, published

³² According to Warhol's catalogue raisonné, *Orange Car Crash 14 Times* was published with illustrations twelve times; five of those included the silkscreened panel alone. For other works, the blank was only added later when the painting was acquired or exhibited (for one example among many, see Frei and Printz 2002, 331).

³³ Wallace did not see *Orange Car Crash Fourteen* [sic] *Times*, as claimed in the catalogue accompanying *Ian Wallace: at the Intersection of Painting and Photography* claims (Wallace 2012, 322). The two works are easily confused: both are dated early 1963, both are composed of two panels, one silkscreened and one blank monochrome, both show car crashes, and although the image ink color in the former is purple, and in the latter, black, this is not perspicuous from black and white illustrations. However, it is clear from the illustration accompanying Wallace's

under the title “Revisionism and its Discontents”, are revealing of how he perceived his own artistic challenge in the context of the resurgence of expressionism. Throughout the text, he criticized the exhibition for its bombast and failure to present a sufficiently critical, historical account of contemporary art. The dearth of artists who emerged in the 70s but who were *not* painters meant that the show was incomplete, he felt, an empty celebration of authenticity, expressive mystique, and as such, a regression behind late modernism, whose conflicts, the monochrome, despite its faltering exhaustion, had still managed to acknowledge (Wallace 1981a, 14). In its pursuit of passionate vitalism, neo-expressionist painting was unable to enfold the alienation of culture under conditions of capitalist expansion. “Although their immediate precursor is Frank Stella, his critical and desperate rejection of the avant-garde postures of his own early work makes it immensely more convincing than this new decorative painting which appears sophomoric by comparison...” Wallace concluded (16-17).

Since Wallace proudly counted Stella among his own precursors, he calculated that a recovery of Stella’s anti-expressionist lineage would also stand, conveniently, as a repudiation of the neo-expressionist trend. In the context of *Westkunst* Warhol’s work stood out as an alternative model along two axes, the first of which was, ironically perhaps, pure aesthetic quality. In the aesthetic terms, Wallace judged Warhol—at least in his disaster paintings—the rival of Jackson Pollock. But however much Wallace remained committed to the traditional aesthetic values of painting, the source of his interest in those values derived from their extraordinary sensitivity to shifts in extra-aesthetic social conditions, not from a belief that their formal particulars should be taken as eternal laws. Success was always contemporary and Warhol’s contemporaneity was signaled by his ambivalence. The disaster paintings leaned towards spectacle without relying on the atavistic expressionism that had returned in recent painting. Thus, despite Warhol’s appropriation of popular imagery, Wallace read the blanks as a device for heightening formalism, to a degree where painting succumbed to its own objecthood.

article in *Vanguard*, that the *Car Crash* in question has only ten frames silkscreened on it. Moreover, Warhol’s catalogue raisonné attests that *Orange Car Crash 14 Times* (entry no. 350) was exhibited only once, in 1988 at the Menil Collection, Houston (Frei and Printz 2002, 318). Currently *Orange Car Crash* is on loan to the Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, Vienna (its permanent home is in the Sammlung Ludwig, Aachen) while *Orange Car Crash 14 Times* is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

“In these *Disaster* paintings Warhol presents a meta-image filtered through the formal construct of the painting as an aesthetic object,” Wallace wrote in his review. “The mechanical reproduction of the image, not only because of its source in the newspaper, but also in its repetition across the picture plane, is matched by the blank, incompleting [sic] field of the second panel of the diptychs (which in point of fact, rarely are reproduced). This dialectic between the image of the world and its social life and the image of painting as the given horizon of art, has been the thematic substructure of much of Warhol’s work” (1981a, 14). By leaving the naked monochrome canvas un-marked and un-silkscreened, Warhol revealed monochrome painting as the ground of the image. The revelation is true in two senses: it is literally true, since the image is silkscreened onto the monochrome surface, which functions concretely as its support. It is also socially true, because the monochromes are art objects that participate in an exhibition situation, part architectural configuration and part social ritual, which shape our experiences of art. In this way, the bi-form structure—and not just the sensational content alone, appropriated from popular sources—reveals Warhol’s paintings to be a part of the reality that they also are compelled to reject. In other words, Warhol’s structure was, in Wallace’s view, proto- or minimally thematic, that is, something more than an allegory for a dialectical condition but an actually, substantially dialectical condition itself.

This same dialectical idea would shortly come to structure of Wallace’s mature work, beginning in its early stages with *Poverty*. In Warhol, Wallace had discovered a potential contemporary alternative to the dominance of expression in painting; incidentally, it was also an alternative to which he had long been committed. In the weird glow of *Westkunst*, Warhol’s painting appeared to Wallace as the latest episode in an anti-expressive aesthetic tradition represented lately by Frank Stella, but whose foundations had been laid Mondrian, and by the pure poetry of Mallarmé before him. In Warhol, Wallace had discovered a powerful method, one that did not solve the problem of poverty as a subject, but elaborated it *as* a problem in a way that could be formally explored and clarified. Warhol’s example was a thin line between social reality and an aesthetics that sought to mount a critique of that same reality. To quote Wall once more, “although Warhol’s art indulges completely in the polemical mode, it does not participate in the liberal-Left consensus—a typically Symbolist position” (Wall 1988, 16). Technically, this would eventually lead Wallace to abandon the quasi-cinematic strategies of *Poverty* and return to the principles of the intersection that had long occupied him. The figures from *Poverty*

disappeared and were replaced by a more potent social subject lifted from the everyday: Wallace's own friends and fellow artists.

2.6 MY HEROES IN THE STREET: ARRIVING AT THE INTERSECTION

Although *Poverty* is an important turning point in Wallace's practice, a fuller realization of the intersection as a critical realist idea would only come with the next major chapter in Wallace's trajectory, *My Heroes in the Street*. In this series, begun in 1986, three important changes occur: contemporary settings and people of Vancouver replace the typological subjects of *Poverty*, the scale is vastly expanded, and the monochrome elements assume a new autonomy by losing their color and migrating out towards the edges of the composition, forming panels that flank the photographs on either side, rather than fields in which the photographs are placed.

Wallace had been photographing his friends and fellow artists since the 1970s. Of those early portraits, the most visible in recent exhibitions and catalogues are *Helen* and *Miki* (both 1971), who were both caught in casual poses on the street. Nothing could be further from the elaborate costumes, figural groupings and heavy technical processing of *Poverty*; the minimalism and directness of these portraits, gives them a clarity that feels intimate—not the intimacy of closeness, but of openness, trust, and hiding nothing. The apparent lack of artifice is reinforced by the full-frame printing, which exposes the film sprockets. Helen smiles as in a tourist photo against a bright sun; she stands on a rough, wood-slat pier (a ramshackle “street”). In the background lie the Dollarton mud flats, where Wallace had joined a squatter community for several months after returning from London. By contrast, Miki stands on an urban street corner, surrounded by concrete sprawl. Both settings contribute something to the feeling of spontaneity, since the street is a space of transition rather than destination, lending a fragility and contingency to the compositions. Wallace had made these pictures during his wanderings through the city of Vancouver (Wallace 1988) and they convey something of the chance encounters between people who navigate similar social channels and share urban territory: a pleasant surprise but nothing out of the ordinary.

In 1986 he began shooting casual environmental portraits for *My Heroes in the Street*, a

series whose title deliberately cited Charles Baudelaire.³⁴ *My Heroes* would both extend his earlier experiment with the monochrome begun in *Poverty* and subject it to a rigorous procedure of distillation by sharpening the difference between painting and photography. This meant first of all, abandoning the technique of silkscreen, which uses ink, for a more photographic process. In the mid-1980s, Wallace had discovered that Colorific Digital Printing Solutions, a Vancouver imaging lab, could print large-scale photographic images for lamination, a technology that they had been offering since 1982 (Wallace 1976-2011). Like chromogenic (c-type) prints, photolamination uses a photo-chemical process, but the laminate prints could be mounted to a canvas surface. The new technology allowed images to approach the size and surface of painting, while holding on to the range of hues and tones expected of photography. Over time the process became technically slicker, with sharper and more saturated images. Returning to the first works of *My Heroes* today, the photographic areas seem impressionistic, peppered with delicate grain. Soft edges of various objects, surfaces and textures encounter each other ever so gently, so that depth is reduced, especially at close viewing distances.

At the same time, the areas of pure, monochrome paint also took on a new autonomy. In *Poverty* the silkscreened images had been positioned in the center of the monochrome field, which formed a thick frame around them; in *My Heroes* these photo-elements came to occupy the entire height of their ground from top to bottom. The painted areas were forced to the outer margins at left and right and lost their color, becoming the same neutral white of the gallery walls. Compositionally, the effect is reminiscent of an altarpiece whose wings have been left blank. Despite their passive whiteness, they take on a powerful structural role, not dominating the composition, but standing as a mediating passage between the flat, bounded area of the image surface and the space of the white cube, whose walls they resemble, becoming both figure and ground.

In other words, this is not Robert Ryman territory: Wallace's white surfaces strive to mimic the physical properties of its environment, to camouflage into real space, even as the bleached whiteness provides support for a very different—but equally compelling—type of

³⁴ In a written text on the “street photos” of 1970, Wallace cites as an inspiration the “random wandering by the literary flâneur on the pavements [sic] of Paris that was passed on from Baudelaire to the Surrealists, and then to the arcades project of Walter Benjamin, and the ‘derive’ or side-tracking of the Situationists” (Wallace 2012, 184).

illusion: the illusion of a window cut into space. In a way, *My Heroes in the Street* is merely the latest version of an old cubist occupation with contrasting planes of flatness and depth. It upsets the normal hierarchy we are tempted to establish between real space, photographic representation, and painting, since here, real space—the space of the gallery—is suddenly called out as highly artificial in its pristine whiteness, not just a neutral box to hold art, but participating and supporting its formal articulation, and thereby serving as a condition of possibility for certain kinds of aesthetic experience. We might also say that the photograph is engaged in its own process of mimicry because of the way it is bonded to the surface of the canvas, reproducing its surface texture in an effect utterly foreign to photographic printing paper.

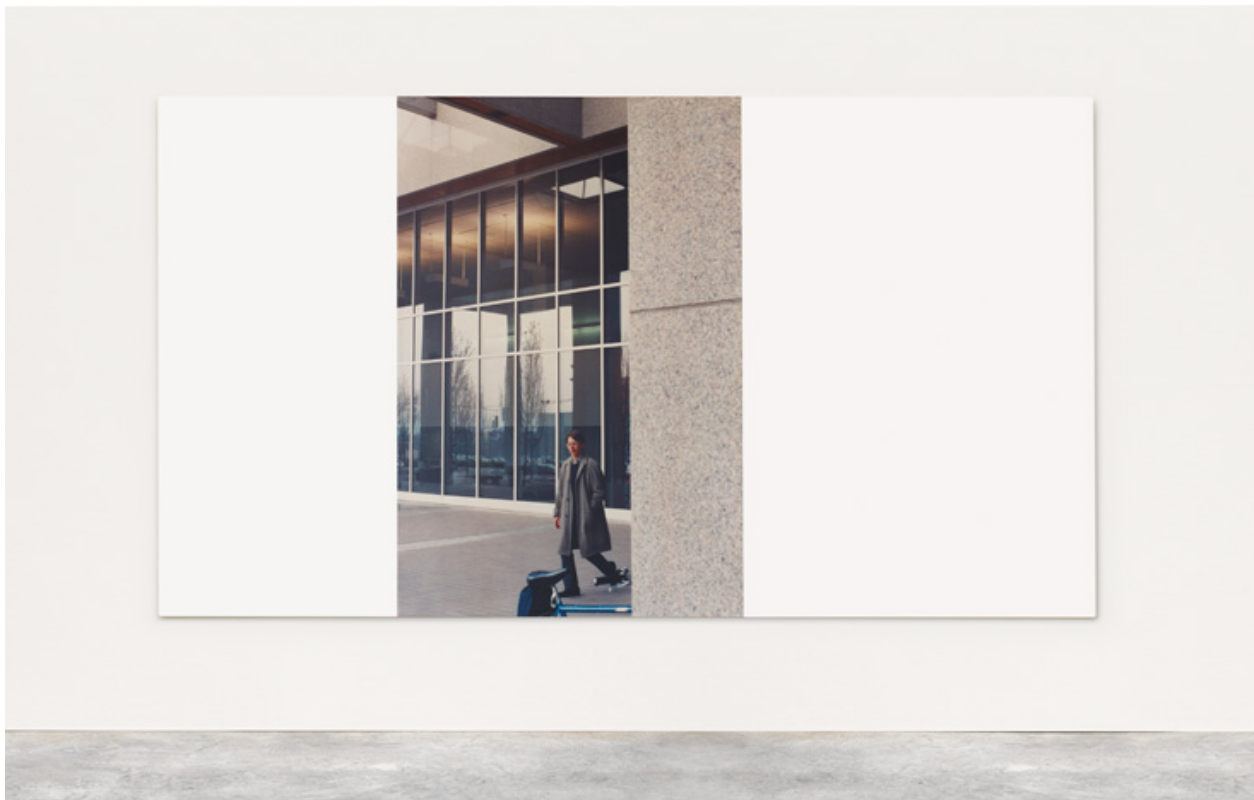


Figure 10 Ian Wallace, *My Heroes in the Street II*, 1986; photolaminate, acrylic on canvas; 183 x 336 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.

These observations apply to the series as a whole, but the individual works modulate the effects in particular ways. *My Heroes in the Street II* [fig. 10] falls into the genre of the environmental portrait, but barely, since the single figure in a raincoat is almost swallowed by the imposing modernist building behind him. On one level this is a banal picture; there is nothing particularly intriguing about the subject who is neither glamorized nor treated as a source of humor, mystery, sexual or any other generic dramatic interest. Instead, the drama lies in the play

of flatness and depth cultivated between the photograph and the flat, white monochrome sections on right and left. Occupying the right-hand portion of the photograph is a sandy-colored stone surface, perhaps a wall or column. It creates a visually flat surface and where it meets the white panel to the right, an intriguing juxtaposition of two kinds of flatness results. One is a photographic effect, achieved pictorially by the relation of the stone surface to the picture plane, including its proximity, orientation and depth of field; the other is a literal surface, whose whiteness and flatness accommodates itself to the wall on which it hangs. This is interesting because it dramatizes the technical differences between painting and photography by bringing them surprisingly close. They are, literally, touching. The photograph is laminated onto the canvas surface, and it disappears for about a quarter of an inch below the white paint, leaving a seam barely visible.

To the left side of the photographic composition, space is cut out into greater depth, helped by a grid of windows that angle backwards behind the picture plane. Here, in the sleek and muscular, if generic, modernism of the architectural surroundings, Wallace discovered the grid, ready-made. More precisely it was a rediscovery; similar “found” white lines had first appeared in Wallace’s 1970 photographs of the intersection outside his studio. Visible on the street are the painted lines that separate and direct traffic where two streets cross, isolating zones for vehicles and pedestrians, and passively accepting the indifferent compliance of thousands of travelers daily. Whereas Wallace had tried, with some success, to take the monochrome out into the world with the planks, and then, to bring the world into the gallery with *Magazine Piece*, by looking at the world through his camera, he discovered the monochrome, the grid, and the intersection, already present, waiting, on the street.

Another reprise, familiar from Wallace’s photographs of the 1970s, marks this large canvas work: reflections, visible in the prominent gridded windows. Some of the building’s features, hidden beyond the frame, can be reconstructed from these reflections, including an overhang that reaches out to meet tall columns, skinny trees and a parking lot beyond. But the information that can be gleaned from the reflection is less important than the overall visual effect, which, like the grid itself, offers a rich variety of lines and geometrical shapes, borrowed, it seems, directly from modernist painting. At the top limit of the grid, several walls of stone cut through the space at an angle, creating a dynamic triangular form, further contributing to the geometrical assemblage in a found composition, like ghostly orphans from Moholy-Nagy and

Malevich. Unlike the photographer Aaron Siskind, who discovered the gesturalism of Clyfford Still's painterly surfaces in irregularly torn skins of old paint, Wallace does not isolate these elements for their morphological similarity to painting but anchors them to their photographic base by providing context within the frame.

Because of its asymmetrical composition, the photograph does not encounter the monochrome panel on the left in the same fashion as it does the panel on the right. On the right, the strip of speckled sandy stone orients its surface to the white surface next to it; on the left, the photograph hollows out backwards into space, and the building's illusory facade encounters the literal canvas surface at an angle. But even here, although spatial depth clearly registers, it is not completely stable: the alignment of the painting's vertical edge with the parallel window muntins has a flattening effect, so that the line of the gridded windows effortlessly pulls the photographic surface towards the flatness of the canvas. Thus, whereas the encounter on the right between photography and monochrome engenders play on two kinds of flatness (the literal and the photographic), on the left is a more familiar play between literal flatness and spatial depth.

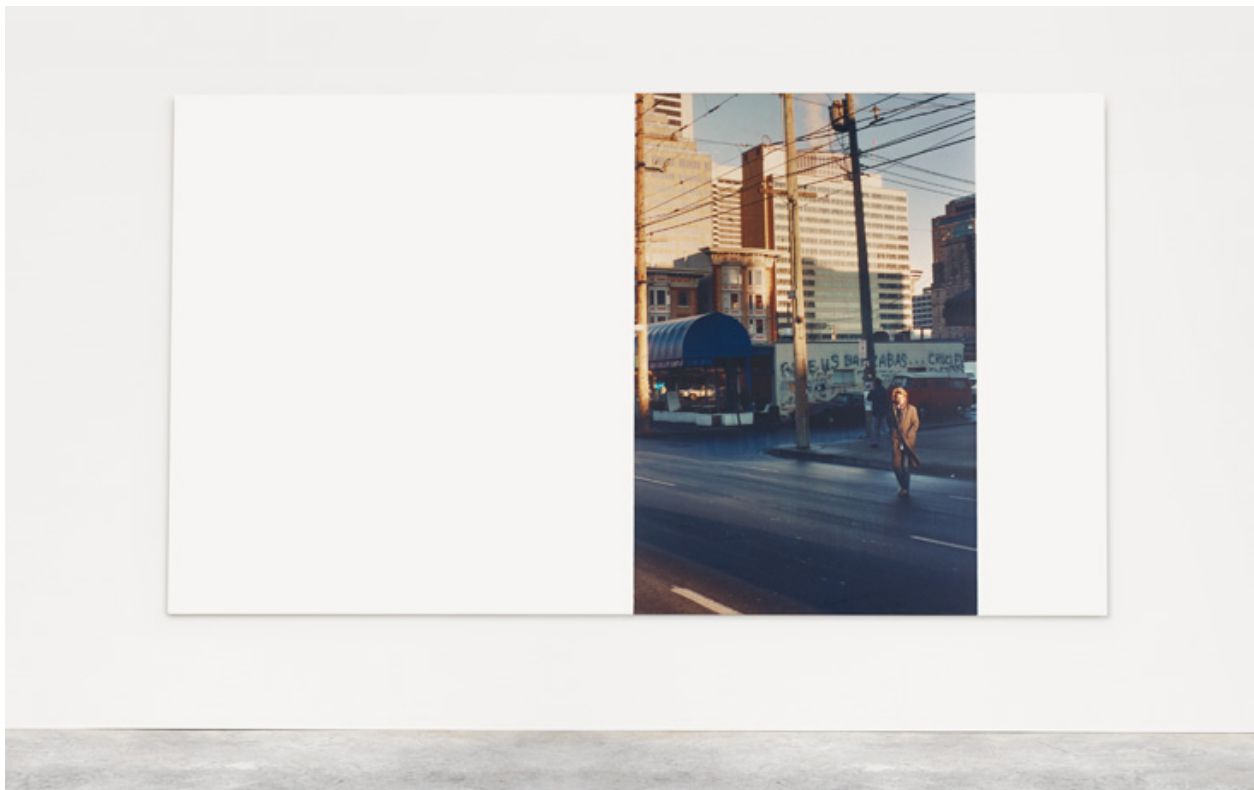


Figure 11 Ian Wallace, *My Heroes in the Street III*, 1986; photolaminate, acrylic on canvas; 183 x 336 cm. Collection of the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto. Gift of Ydessa Hendeles, 2009.

The photograph flirts with flatness even more intensely in the lyrical, softer third picture

of the series, which shows a solitary woman crossing the street towards the camera against a backdrop of layered high-rises [fig. 11]. Her face and upper body are caught by a fading but still hot yellow sunlight, as are the facades of the buildings in the background, but the foreground and mid-ground are swallowed by purple and blue shadows. Despite the spatial depth created by this contrast, as well as the angle of the street, which recedes into the background as a gentle diagonal, the lens and light compress the buildings into a surface resembling a theatrical backdrop or scrim. The flatness of the gridded modernist building, with its rows and rows of tiny windows, asserts itself.

While Wallace was working on the series, the Canadian Photographic Portfolio Society engaged him to prepare a portfolio of ten maquettes in advance of the larger works, which Wallace called, simply, “Studies for Pictures on Canvas” (1986). He continued to refer to these as “pictures on canvas” or even “paintings” endowing them with an ancestry in his monochrome experiments. An edition of ten (plus two artist proofs) was published that combined lithography and photography and could be purchased for \$1200 each. On the occasion of the publication, he drafted an artist’s statement to be silkscreened and included in each portfolio. An excerpt clarified his goals:

In these works I am attempting to position the photographic image, which is loaded with specific references to reality, common experience, and the human subject, in relation to the ideal space of painting in its purest state as the horizon of art. My interest is not exclusively directed to subject matter as such, or to the concept of art as an abstract idea: I am trying to mark a meaning across the space of representation. (Wallace 2001, n. p.)

The need to create meanings “across the space of representation” rather than in only one or another of its spaces, registers, or traditions, echoes the idea of the intersection. Individual experience is treated in the same way, as a node or prism for structured habits and signs that are a part of us and also separate us from ourselves. I have quoted the 1986 passage above from a later statement, written in March 2001 as Wallace prepared for an exhibition at Catriona Jeffries Gallery, which represents him and his work in Vancouver. That he chose to reproduce his 1986 statement demonstrates a powerful continuity of vision in his own practice and a commitment to a dialectical idea that I have been arguing can be traced back to his early encounter with *Bagged Place*.

Elsewhere in the 2001 text Wallace also clarifies how he understood and used the

cacophonous semiotic texture of the street to meditate on modernity, urbanism, alienation and architecture. He also makes explicit his realist concerns and links them to critical theory. Casting a retrospective look on the first exhibition of *My Heroes* in the Spring of 1986 at Coburg Gallery in Vancouver, where it was joined by the work of Vikky Alexander, Wallace glosses his earlier ideas as follows:

I attempted to invoke those moments in which we are absolutely ourselves and thus absolutely alienated, and therefore separated out as unique presences in a world saturated with organizational demands of the superstructure, that is, of [sic] all those forces in the modern city that are other than who we are as individuals... These portraits were very informally composed... I thought of them as a kind of urban realism or documents of a transitory existence. (Wallace 2001, n. p.)

That Wallace explicitly calls this “a kind of urban realism” links the intersection to the concept of critical realism I have been trying to develop throughout this discussion. He has also placed critical theory at the center of his artistic concerns during this period, citing Adorno’s notion of “truth content” as an influence on his breakthrough with *Poverty*:

...I found that the aesthetic theory of the Frankfurt School philosopher, Theodor Adorno, with his emphasis on immanent critique and dialectical approach to truth content relevant to my thinking at this time. From this perspective I formulated the concept of “contradiction in suspension”, the combination of photography and painting as contrasted yet autonomous elements within the same frame, to describe my next phase. This phase I initiated with a programmatic attention to a political subject, in a work titled *Poverty*. (Wallace 2012, 40; see also Wallace 2010)

Truth content does not refer to what we normally mean by facts in the positive sense. Adorno like other Marxists of his time was skeptical about the positive methods of philosophy and science, whose objectivity was produced ideologically, they believed, by the dominant classes of a divided society. Nor does truth content refer to “content” in the everyday sense (as something opposed to “form”), but rather implicates the form that language or art takes. Like bourgeois science, the syntactical rules of language are also shaped by structures of inequality in the course of historical development. As elaborated in *Aesthetic Theory*, a text that has long been important to Wallace (Wallace 2012, 244), truth content is not satisfied by revolutionary subjects (for example, heroic workers) but requires a formal transgression, which obliquely releases new

meanings in works of art, music or literature, and sometimes in philosophy as well. Consequently, as form is mediated by content, the older uses of the term “formal” become trivial. On this view, modernist works of art, while necessarily enigmatic, are not merely meaningless although they may repudiate figuration. Likewise, the essay, the fragment, and the chiasmic sentence that characterize the Frankfurt School style, are not ornamental but integral to the philosophical work the texts accomplish (Bernstein 1991, 8).³⁵

These ideas are familiar from the aesthetics of modernism, now historical, that Wallace mines for his work. What is important to emphasize is that the work of art must transgress not just any aesthetic convention whatever, but work against the particular illusion that it creates, to be above or apart from the social world. It can do this in any number of ways; in Adorno’s time, this meant refusing aesthetic beauty and embracing disjunction, fragmentation and ugliness. The payoff, in Adorno’s view, was not just innovation for the sake of it, but a representation of real disjunction, fragmentation and ugliness that exists in the world, however much the world appears as seamless, functional, beautiful or efficient. In this way, art acknowledges non-identity. By the 1980s, in a period when neo-expressionism was returning with full force, Wallace bet that the social world could reappear by transgressing against expression and embracing the anti-expressive aesthetic tradition he discovered in the work of Mallarmé and Mondrian. This would entail stripping away the romantic elements of *Poverty* and embracing a prosaic, even banal look, which crystalized in *My Heroes in the Street*.

2.7 RECENT WORK: INTERSECTIONS, DECLARATIONS AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Wallace’s late work has so far continued to luxuriate in large scale and lush color and to refine a masterful repertoire of playful visual tricks, feints, and puzzles. But between the monumental scale, tight execution and the erudite critical commentary of his canvas works, a quieter series of conceptual interventions is easily overlooked. These are his “declarations,”

³⁵ For a detailed example, consult Gerhard Richter’s reading of the segment “Zum Ende” from *Minima Moralia* (Adorno 1997b), which shows in detail how Adorno uses prepositions, sentence structure and the reflexive *sich* to multiply and destabilize meanings (Richter 2006).

which take the form of Internet URLs (website addresses) painted or printed in vinyl lettering directly on the gallery wall. The inscriptions are large enough to be seen at a distance, and are often, but not always, mounted above a doorway—a conspicuous, perhaps auspicious, place. Each URL designates the location of an online copy of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly after World War II. These are cryptic works that seem to depart in almost every way from Wallace’s dominant practice. Yet I will argue that they ought to be considered as a late iteration of his earlier occupation with the intersection, even as an intensification of it, since it is here that the concept of the intersection explicitly takes on the language of human rights.

I suspect the declarations are obscure, in part, because they seem to hail from an earlier, linguistic-conceptual period in Wallace’s work. In an interview from 2008, Wallace clearly positioned the declarations in that tradition, singling out Robert Barry’s *All the things that I know but of which I am not at the moment thinking; 1:36 PM, June 15, 1969* as exemplary of the kind of piece he wanted to create: rigorous and highly structured but also philosophically expansive. More specifically, Barry’s piece attracted Wallace because, as he put it, while its linguistic character meant that it clearly lacked measurable physical dimensions, it nevertheless was “still a work that is bounded by the limits of what it is not” (Wallace 2009, n. p.); that is, it assumed its identity dialectically, by acknowledging difference. Barry’s piece achieves this in at least two ways: first, by playing with semantic and philosophical notions of positive and negative and second, by positing the limits of the subject (the artist himself?) at the moment of encounter with what it is not, as a source of potential and change. As we shall see, identity, difference, history and intersubjectivity are also at issue in Wallace’s “declarations.”

The first “declaration” was made for an international group project for Zerynthia, a contemporary art association founded 1991 in Serra di Rapalano, in the Tuscan countryside near Siena. In the spring of 1999, Wallace was contacted by curators Dora and Mario Pieroni, inviting him to join a group of international artists for a discussion in the run-up to a show they were curating on the theme of “windows.” Ken Lum, another Vancouver artist, had also been invited, and he and Wallace developed their ideas in discussion together, mostly via email. Wallace threw out concerns about the global ecological vulnerability, and Lum responded, reminding him of the unequal distribution of vulnerability across human populations (Wallace 1999b). Ideas

percolated throughout May. In early June, they managed to meet in person in Valencia, while en route in different directions across the Atlantic.

Wallace had already been to Serre in 1992, during which time he made photographs that he hoped to incorporate into larger works. He considered using these as a starting point for his project and sent a package of photographs to Dora Pieroni. In her faxed reply she praised them, noting that part of the quarry had since been converted by the artist Vettor Pisani (b. 1934) into a “museum of catastrophe” (Museo della Catastrofe) (Pisani 1998). This piece of information seemed to shift something in Wallace’s thinking: prior to this fax there had been some back-and-forth about the terms of participation, associated costs and expectations, the result of which was plentiful space but a meager budget. But shortly after receiving this last message (which found the artist in Paris) Wallace wrote to Lum: “i have been in touch with dora and am cooking up endless options for windows - i think that i will leave money out of the discussion altogether and only concentrate on art, the space that is now called catastrophe and universal human rights” (Wallace 1999a). The phrase “the space that is called human rights” appears a second time in Wallace’s papers, this time alone, scribbled on a yellow Post-It note stuck to the fax from Dora Pieroni. It is likely that the phrase came to Wallace while reading her account of the Italian conceptualist artist’s “museum of catastrophe” and that it gave direction to his work, ultimately producing the unusual “declarations.”



Figure 12 Ian Wallace, *Declaration I*, 1999, vinyl lettering on the wall, dimensions variable. Installation view at Zerynthia, Serra di Rapalano, Italy.

Declaration I was installed, as a part of the group show *Venus's Window*, at the Centre Civico La Grancia, from July 31 to August 8, 1999. It is difficult to reconstruct from a single, tightly-cropped installation photograph how the piece interacted with the space and/or other objects around it, but its stark simplicity is simultaneously striking and banal [fig. 12]. The URL is positioned just slightly above a doorframe to the left, recalling the similarly unconventional placing of *Blue Monochrome* outside the gallery at SFU so many years ago. The use of the URL also alludes to the earlier spatial strategy in another way too: in 1999, before the ubiquity of mobile devices and long before anyone had dreamed up the QR code, there was no immediate way to pass from real to virtual space. Since the content of the webpages is not visible from the URLs themselves, accessing these works' meanings required gallery visitors to first access a web browser, which meant the works' real "content" was only available outside the gallery. This was not unlike Wallace's and Lunden's 1968 exhibition, which placed works in hallways, stairwells and on the building's exterior. But whereas in the earlier work, the installation forced the audience outside the gallery and into the real world, the URLs lead viewers from the gallery into

a virtual location on the World Wide Web. The strategy also bears some resemblance to *Magazine Piece*, or to the readymade, for that matter. But unlike *Magazine Piece*, the “declarations” do not just import “outside” content into the space of the aesthetic, but rather provide a path that leads from within that space back to the world outside.

In 1999, a time before mobile Internet, the URL could be seen as a bridge between the two, or perhaps a boundary. A URL is a line of text that registers to both human and machine, but is used differently by each. It is used by the machine to locate a document, but the content of that document itself need not have any particular content. For humans, by contrast, the URL alone is useless and the document is not only meaningful, but is fraught with a multiplicity of meanings: a moral injunction, a political platform, a source of hope or frustration, or something else. If the URL is a point of intersection or a passage between two spaces, one phenomenal and one virtual, then where is the “space of human rights” alluded to in Wallace’s email to Lum?

The URL used for *Declaration I* is now dead, but an Internet archive search tracked down five crawl records for 1999, which redirect to the United Nations *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* on a website managed by a private individual. It is not clear why Wallace chose this particular website; subsequent documented declarations linked directly to the website of the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights, under “www.unhchr.ch.” In addition, subsequent URLs were selected with particular contexts in mind: at the 2000 Bienal de La Habana, the URL linked to the Spanish version of the text; in Rotterdam, 2008, the language was Frisian, a minority language within the Netherlands.

Currently, the only URL still working is the one that appeared in Wallace’s most recent exhibition, at the Vancouver Art Gallery in 2013 [fig. 13]. It produces the *Musqueam Declaration of Aboriginal Rights*, which concerns indigenous autonomy, self-determination and land rights, signed by the Musqueam Band in Vancouver, 1976 (Musqueam Indian Band 1976, n. p.). The Band members still reside in present-day Vancouver and its region, on a much-reduced portion of their ancestors’ original territory.³⁶

The Band had been in the news in the run-up to Wallace’s opening because of an issue that emerged with a real estate developer in March 2012. The developer hoped to build condos

³⁶ Some of this ancestral, unceded territory is now occupied by the University of British Columbia, Wallace’s alma mater (Turner 2013).

over Musqueam burial ground at Marpole Midden, on the southern edge of Vancouver, despite the fact that the location had already been designated a Canadian Heritage Site in 1933 (CBC News 2012, Cole 2012a, 2012b, Naoibh 2012). Protestors organized public demonstrations, which continued alongside negotiations into early summer. Wallace, who follows local politics, would have seen the coverage in the *Georgia Straight*, *The Vancouver Courier* or on CBC News, and probably selected the URL to the Musqueam Band's website as a reminder to local visitors that the issue remained unsettled. Wallace's retrospective opened to the public on October 27, 2012, with the URL displayed magisterially on the main floor in the Vancouver Art Gallery's rotunda, but it would take almost a year for the parties involved to reach a negotiated solution. In early October 2013, the media reported that the Musqueam Band had purchased Marpole Midden, halting the planned development (Cole 2013, The Canadian Press 2013, Woo 2013).



Figure 13 Ian Wallace, *Declaration VII*, 2012, vinyl lettering on wall, 15.75 x 502 cm. Installation view at the Vancouver Art Gallery, Vancouver

The 2013 installation was actually the second “declaration” to use a text on indigenous rights. The first was another Vancouver installation, at the Contemporary Art Gallery in 2006. The 2006 URL linked to the *Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which had been prepared by the UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations in 1993, but which was

only adopted later in September 2007. Coincidentally, 2006 also saw the publication of an article by Jennifer A. Hamilton, which details an earlier conflict over Musqueam Band land rights that traveled as high as the Supreme Court of Canada. The article makes a number of points that shed light on the complexity of Wallace' series, suggesting there is much more at stake than an updating of his earlier strategies with a digital-conceptual twist.

Hamilton, who currently teaches legal studies and anthropology at University of Massachusetts, Amherst, recounts a conflict that emerged in 1995, when the Musqueam Band went to court to collect outstanding rents from non-native leaseholders of Musqueam Park. Musqueam Park is an affluent residential area in West Vancouver, where individuals own their own homes, but, partly by a curious knot in the legal history of aboriginal title and partly by historical accident, not the land their homes are on. The Band hoped to raise rents from their historic, contractual lows of about \$400 per year, to bring them in line with the current value of the properties, which would have been about \$36,000. Understandably alarmed by this possibility, residents fought the Band in court, attracting intense public and media attention. Hamilton cites a cover story from the Canadian edition of *Time* magazine, which asymmetrically pitched ordinary Canadian "homeowners" against aboriginal profiteering, while failing to substantially elucidate the legal grounds of the Band's claim. What is interesting, however, is not the racial bias of the media, but how the conflict created an inversion of discourses of difference.

In her summary of the case, Hamilton points to the novelty of the framework and language deployed in the Band's legal strategy: "In contrast to other First Nations' claims in recent high-profile Supreme Court cases, the Musqueam did not go before the Court to seek legal recognition of their *difference* but rather asked it to recognize their *sameness* before the law" (Hamilton 2006, 91). Although Hamilton recognizes the power of a discourse of difference, she emphasizes that this case was never technically about aboriginal rights, although it eventually developed that character. It was originally an attempt to gain some economic advantage using avenues suggested by Canadian settler laws and capitalist real estate practice. Specifically, the Band invoked the language of Canadian common law governing contracts and property. By contrast, the residents used the charged language of "apartheid" and "ethnic cleansing by fiscal means" (Hamilton 2006, 94). In other words, the non-aboriginal leaseholders mobilized the language of difference to cast themselves as "the victims of *race*-based oppression, a discursive move that simultaneously effaces their economic and political privilege *and* casts aspersions on

the moral legitimacy of the Band's legal claims" (97). Here, Hamilton alludes to the history that the discourse of difference was supposed to illuminate and critique: settlers' enrichment at the expense of indigenous populations was protected because laws assumed settler's racial superiority. Non-aboriginal leaseholders of Musqueam Park had long been treating the property as if it were freehold land, and taking advantage of the rising real estate prices in Vancouver. This arrangement, inherited from layers of colonial and capitalist laws had evolved since the nineteenth century in their particulars, but not in their racist assumption that natives lacked a concept of "property" and/or the epistemological framework to properly exploit it.

In trying to understand why the leaseholders grasped and inverted the discourse of difference, Hamilton points to the threat contained in the image of sameness. When the Band picked up Canadian common law as a tool to fight for their interests, they blurred the distinct image of indigenous difference, which is "central both to settler identity and to associated concepts of property. This commensurability was deeply unsettling to the leaseholders and other settler Canadians...." (Hamilton 2006, 98). She goes on to cite Peter Fitzpatrick, who has written on law and postcolonialism: "This contention [of an Other] involves that which is acceptable or within the identity being created in its difference to that which is unfit and excluded. Looked at in reverse, if the excluded were to reenter, as it were, then the identity would disintegrate" (quoted in Hamilton 2006, 98). It is a simple but powerful dialectical point: identities are forged through difference, so the loss of difference would mean the loss of identity—a threatening prospect to any subject, especially when identity is bound up with real material privileges. In a split decision, the Supreme Court of Canada re-valued the Musqueam Park property at 50 percent, creating a separate spatial and legal category of property called "leasehold reserve land" which is defined as being outside the market for purposes of calculating rents. Hamilton observes that the majority decision failed to account for the colonial history that had led to this categorical creation, arguing finally that the outcome in Musqueam Park constituted nothing less than a neo-colonial "resettlement" of the land—a preservation of the status quo (Hamilton 2006, 102-03).

The complexity of the Musqueam case with its conceptual separation of spaces and unexpected inversions of terms, suggest not so much a background for Wallace's series of declarations, but vital features of it. I claimed above that the "declarations" ought to be regarded as an extension of Wallace's exploration of the intersection, which had so far taken mainly photographic and painted form. But at the same time, they also go further, by deploying the

strategy over explicitly normative thematic content. Rather than introducing a passage from the painted surface of the canvas to the real space of the gallery, the “declarations” pull gallery visitors into virtual space, and ultimately, into the strange space of Musqueam Park, which has real geographical extension, even as it is overlaid with contested identities, histories and legal categories. Musqueam Park is a space of intersection, where settler and indigenous trajectories cross, literally over the very same territory, but do not merge. At the same time, indigenous notions of ownership have been rendered “historical” by the dominance of Canadian common law, which itself has become anachronistic at the dawning of a new, robust discourse of indigenous rights, recently recognized by the United Nations (Anaya 1999). Temporalities also collide, but there is no indication that they are moving towards any kind of union or hybrid resolution.

Traditional discourses of realism often pitch reality against representation, implicitly valorizing the former over the latter. Wallace, however, is more committed to examining how these realities meet, without assuming that one can simply be absorbed into the other without remainder. However, this does not entail a capitulation to relativism, where all realities exist independently and equally. In fact, equality is exactly at issue. In the case of Musqueam Park, the cooptation of difference by settler Canadians, reminds us that a discourse of difference alone is not a sufficient tool for progressive critique. Rather, difference must be tied to the concept of sameness, which is also a source of critical power, because it gives philosophical substance to the progressive politics of equality. What the Universal Declaration of Human Rights aspires to is a discourse of difference *without* inequality, where the other is not the same as the self, but is also not inferior to it. Or, where the other is the same in dignity and humanity, but different, in all the other surprising and fascinating ways it is possible to be different. Because this state remains virtual—something ethically and philosophically compelling but not historically real—the Universal Declaration itself is fragmented into separate declarations for indigenous and minority populations, and even one for the Musqueam. After affirming their rights to self-determination and stating, “Neither we nor our ancestors have ever given up, extinguished or diminished our aboriginal rights and title by treaty or agreement with any foreign government or power”—which includes the governments of Canada and British Columbia—the Musqueam Declaration closes with a line that reveals the paradoxical, unsettled state of universal humanity: “This is our aboriginal right; and a basic, universal human right” (Musqueam 1976, n. p.).

The “declarations” series itself, therefore, takes on the intersection as its temporal meta-structure. The series, as a product of Wallace’s 40-year artistic enterprise, has a coherent, familiar profile of its own across time and space, yet it manifests differently at each new site. A comparison with Lawrence Weiner is instructive here. Weiner’s famous *Statement of Intent* (1969) (often misidentified as a “Declaration” rather than a “Statement”³⁷) emphasized “receivership” as a condition of the work. Although the *Statement* is often read as a conceptual exploration of language, structure, sculpture and material conditions, it is also a profoundly ethical document, since Weiner subordinates the artist’s intent to the condition of the one who receives it. There is a way of reading the *Statement* as an affirmation of intersubjectivity, and more importantly, as intersubjective vulnerability, and it is significant here that Weiner’s linguistic works stand as a precedent for Wallace’s “declarations” insofar as both inscribe the texts (with vinyl lettering, usually) directly on a wall. The comparison also suggests an overlooked or forgotten ethical thread within conceptualism, on which point, it is interesting to note that Weiner at one time considered becoming a labor organizer, was involved in civil rights activism, and has more recently been alarmed at the revival of European racism. When asked whether art-making is a moral necessity, he replied, “Totally” (2009, 52).

In the end, perhaps the Musqueam Band’s identification of aboriginal rights with human rights is not as paradoxical as it appears. Although the Universal Declaration of Human Rights aspires to stand as an exhaustively protective document, it can only do so by positing the equality of all humans as humans, whereas the *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* entails a recognition that humanity is a fragile state and that its universality is constantly under threat. If it were historically, empirically the case that aboriginal rights were human rights, then what would the declaration’s signatories have to declare? What Wallace’s “declarations” propose, however, contingently, is not a reentry of the other into the same, much less an assimilation of one reality to another, but a different category of separation, between difference and inequality. As with his other work, the intersection here is a productive structure, a metaphor, a diagnosis and a utopian aspiration as well as a hypothesis that reconfigures the epistemological claims of realism as an

³⁷ See for example, Burke (2009), Cooke (2013?) and Stern (2008), where “declaration” appears in the title of Weiner’s text, not just as a description of it. Weiner also published a book, *STATEMENTS*, in January 1968.

ethical process. It proposes that different beings will only truly know each others' difference when that difference is experienced as a shared humanity.

3.0 JEFF WALL: REALISM AS ILLEGIBILITY

The argument of this chapter will strike many readers as deeply counter-intuitive, because it centers on an artist famous for staging his photographs. The artist is Jeff Wall, best-known for his large-scale, dramatic photographs, which are printed as positive transparencies and mounted in a lightbox—an *haute* version of the back-lit advertising panels common to bus shelters and airports. They are dense with detail, lushly colored, and their monumental size demands they be hung like easel paintings. The museum scale combined with Wall's tendency to quote from art-historical sources have invited comparisons with European tableau painting.

Wall's photographs are also, as I said, staged. *The Destroyed Room* (1979), one of the earliest works accomplished in the transparency medium, was built in a studio. Its set was dressed and objects carefully arranged (or, more likely, energetically and deliberately strewn about to achieve an accidental appearance). The color of the interior walls was selected to imitate a "Pompeian" red and even the composition was modeled after the bold diagonals of its source, Eugene Delacroix's *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827). Finally, if there was any lingering doubt about the artificiality of the scenario, the artist banished it slyly but decisively by cutting a door and window in the left and right walls respectively, offering a peak outside: wood beam supports, a painted studio wall, artificial lights. A glance outside reveals yet another inside. Neither the room nor its destruction and certainly not its registration on film, was at all spontaneous. From beginning to glorious, spectacular end, it was always a set-up.

So what is realist about Wall's art? Tools such as building a set, hiring actors and assembling pictorial elements digitally—all part of Wall's practice—ought to disqualify him as a realist, the thinking goes, because such extreme manipulation is unacceptable to the realism of photography, whose purest expression is documentary. The existential core of documentary is observation, and observation prohibits any intervention that would violate the integrity of the

object.³⁸ Indeed, this is exactly the argument a critic presented to Jeff Wall in conversation in 2003, proposing that documentary and staging are “two different ways of approaching truthfulness in photography.” But the artist disagreed, replying, “I think no matter how you construct any photo you’re always working with this inevitable factuality, you can’t escape relating back to facts” (Wall 2003, 11)—an interesting inversion of the usual line that any attempt to represent facts inevitably capitulates to fiction. He took this same position again, in a later interview, stating his case even more strongly. “I’ve always been opposed to the idea that there is ‘fiction’ and then there is ‘fact’ in relation to photography. That has always seemed to be a very static and unrevealing way of looking at it.” He does not oppose the idea that there are procedures we call “documentary” and others that seem different, because their subject is prepared, but insists that the categories participate in each other, inextricably (Criqui 2007 34, 36). At the same time, while acknowledging the central role that “facts” play in our understanding of photography, Wall remains skeptical about the application of concepts like representational “adequacy” to the class of photographs we call art (Wall 2007, 255).³⁹ Rather than starting out from the position that there are two (perhaps ideal) classes of photography (fact, fiction) and trying to understand how Wall blends them, we might do better to begin by assuming that documentary and cinematography (Wall’s terms) are already mutually mediated, and set ourselves the task of understanding how. At the very least, a better understanding of Wall’s realism must reconcile his acceptance of photography’s unavoidable facticity with his

³⁸ When interventions are discovered they often trigger a scandal, for example, the revelation about *National Geographic*’s editorial choice to compress the distance between the pyramids in order to accommodate the vertical format of the magazine’s cover. The same normative expectations govern print journalism and literary non-fiction. (National Press Photographers Association 2012).

³⁹ Like Ian Wallace, his Vancouver colleague and early collaborator, Wall accounts for the referential power of photography as a phenomenon in diagnostic, rather than causal, terms. For example, on the question of “accurate depiction” in photography, Wall has said:

If the picture is made outside strictly controlled conditions, any claims it makes to provide information can be tested only through a process of interpretation. But we believe that there will be a substantial process of interpretation applied to works of art and we believe that that process will bring out something that can be accepted as ‘telling’ about the times the picture shows us. (Wall 2013, n. p.)

directorial practice.⁴⁰

Before continuing, I should pause briefly and note that others before me have been moved to comment on the realist elements of Wall's work, but they have done so only to emphasize how sophisticated, and therefore how distant from "naïve" realism, Wall truly is (Christov-Bakargiev 1990, 37; Bédar quoted in Dary and Taddei 1993, 61, Wall 1990, 51). Jean-Christophe Ammann, for example, makes explicit that Wall's realism is just a sleight of hand: "The way in which Jeff Wall confronts us with a 'total image', faking reality and simultaneously exposing the fake, is remarkable" (Ammann 1984, n. p.). Barely concealed beneath this praise is a distinction between "remarkable" photographers whose ability to "lay bare the device" earns them the title of artist and others who are merely photographers. The distinction relies on an old modernist mantra that photography itself is no art, and that the art is born from a struggle with the soulless machine. It is therefore impossible to be both an artist and a sincere realist; to be a realist artist means not just deploying, but subverting, realist idioms.

In this chapter I argue against the assessment that Wall's realism is merely a sophisticated feint. Wall's realism is not rhetorical, I claim, but critical, and the complexly layered structure of his work is less about fiction and fact than about visibility and invisibility. Instead of pursuing his subject through visual models of fit, correspondence, similarity, symmetry, analogue, match, etc. his art draws out his subject's contradiction, difference and otherness. Approaching Wall's work through the framework of critical realism not only reconciles the contradictory pull felt by Ammann and other commentators towards realism and towards its unmasking; it also offers a richer account of Wall's relationship to his art-historical sources. Most commentators, impressed with his engagement with the art of the past, conclude that Wall has revived the tradition of European easel painting by paying homage to its luminaries in photographic form. By contrast, I argue that he has used his sources not primarily to access the artistic past, but to represent subject matter, which he does paradoxically by rendering it exceedingly resistant to interpretation, illegible. Wall achieves this through a method he calls "cinematography," which makes his subjects strange but plausible. In other words, Wall's pictorial technique is designed to access the subject by blocking interpretation, a notion that runs sharply against our inherited notion of

⁴⁰ The photography critic A.D. Coleman coined the term "directorial mode" in 1976, at around the same time that Wall, Ian Wallace, Cindy Sherman and others began staging events for the camera (Coleman 1979). Coleman's pioneers, however, were Les Krims and Duane Michaels.

realism as “transparency” but which is consistent with a dialectical conception of non-identity. As I have tried to show in my Introduction, the ability to access the non-identical, or more accurately, the appearance of doing so, is a more promising path from subject to object, than the one accepts (or rejects) “adequacy” as the measure of pictorial truth.

3.1 JEFF WALL AND HIS SOURCES

The argument begins with a consideration of the 1982 work, *Diatrobe*. Typical for Wall’s art, *Diatrobe* is a large, back-lit transparency with figures. The setting is vaguely urban, a mostly green mix of tall grasses and trees, with the roofs of residences peaking over the tree-tops in the background, met by a thick strip of slightly overcast blue sky. In the mid-ground is a mound of earth and to the left a pile of branches, broken and distraught. The figures, both women, ignore this anti-landscaping. They have been caught by the camera as they walk across the composition from right to left, probably following the sandy crescent of earth that serves as a path. The woman on the left frowns and looks slightly downwards; the woman on the right, holding a small child, gazes ahead and opens her mouth in a “speaking” gesture, endowing the work with its title.

In many ways this work is not unusual for this period of Wall’s oeuvre: the medium, lighting, and scale appear in other similar compositions. But I have selected *Diatrobe* because of the way it relates to its source, *Landscape with Diogenes* (c. 1648) by Nicolas Poussin [fig. 14], because of the way it has been written about and because the commentary provides an angle into the problem of illegibility, which I take to be a sign of Wall’s critical realism.

Looking at *Diatrobe* together with its source makes clear a number of similarities and modifications. Both are horizontal landscapes with figures. Both are divided by a curved path that carries the viewer visually from foreground to background. But in *Diatrobe*, Poussin’s majestic landscape has disappeared, replaced by uneven patches of earth and greenery, and possibly the detritus from a nearby building site. The philosopher and the crouching youth in Poussin’s foreground have also vanished; in their place are two “young, impoverished

mothers”—as Wall describes his figures (Wall 2007, 191–92).⁴¹ Wall was drawn to this subject, he claims, after seeing two women walking on the street and talking intensely. In an interview with Els Barents in 1985, Wall recalled his visits to the urban spaces made available to welfare mothers in Vancouver, “playgrounds, clinics, supermarkets, and laundries” and discovered that these women were socially invisible, yet targets of blame for failing to live up to the ideal (bourgeois) image of family life. He tried, with *Diatribes*, to connect “proletarian motherhood” with the activity of discourse, argumentation and critique represented by the philosophers by placing the mothers in this layered, rational space, where, by virtue of the status the mothers shared with the philosophers as social outcasts, they could occupy an objective, critical perspective on society. “Thus I could represent them, typologically, through the classicistic [sic] structuring of the picture, as engaged in such discourse” (Wall 2007, 192).



Figure 14 Jeff Wall, *Diatribes*, 1985, transparency in lightbox, 203.0 x 229.0 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

⁴¹ Wall identifies both figures as mothers although only one child is pictured. We assume the “talking” woman on the right is holding her own child, and that the “listening” woman’s child is absent. However, it is also possible if unlikely that both mothers’ children are absent, and that the “talking” woman holds the child of a mother not pictured.



Figure 15 Nicolas Poussin, *Landscape with Diogenes (Paysage avec Diogene)*, 1648, oil on canvas, 60 x 221 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Wall further explained in detail how he scouted the location. “So anyway, for *Diatribes*, I was looking for a straight road at the edge of the city and I couldn’t find one. Then finally I saw this curved lane and thought ‘That’s it.’ ...I realized that this road set up a spatial situation that strongly recalled the classical landscape of Poussin” specifically, *Diogenes* (Wall 2007, 190). Wall goes on to explain that Poussin, like other neo-classical painters, deliberately concealed the vanishing point in his painting by adopting a curved, rather than direct path from foreground to background. In classical landscape, Wall argued, the direction of entry is oblique. Paths, streams or breaks in the generous foliage wind diagonally into orthogonal space, producing a gentle recession through layered planes in such a way that preserves the rational order of linear perspective. Wall interpreted Poussin’s concealment of the vanishing point as a structural necessity, because it is “the irrational point which permits you to call the whole rational structure into question” (Wall 2007, 191).

I have nothing to add to Wall’s interpretation of Poussin; I will treat its accuracy as an open question for Poussin scholars, who will no doubt be tempted to contest it. But as a statement of the artist’s intent, this interview is an art historian’s dream of textual clarity and utility. Not only does Wall definitively identify his source, he explains his interest in it and ties it in a theoretically precise fashion to the central subject of his own work: proletarian motherhood. Moreover, he helpfully grounds the central subject in a first-hand experience of observing particular mothers, which appear to have inspired the making of *Diatribes*, at least as much as the

curved lane that inspired the use of Poussin. Nevertheless, as I will argue momentarily, the subject is both more critical less straightforward than this reconstructed account suggests. But if I linger with the subject, I do so with the artist's blessing. An artist statement entitled, unambiguously, "To the Spectator", published in a catalogue for a 1979 exhibition at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, opened with these lines: "I am interested primarily in subject-matter, in an art of subjects. The fluorescent-backlit Cibachrome transparencies I've had made are used as a delivery system for these subjects" (Wall 1979, n. p.). In the same text he noted that the delivery system itself was not neutral, inert, but contributed to the "reading" of the subject.

Subject, source, and the relationship between them, as understood by the artist: the case seems art historically clear, almost perfectly so, and after a fashion, it is. But in another way the whole thing is completely obscure. The obscurity does not issue from the absence of particulars, for example, the name and location of the particular road whose shape grafted itself onto Wall's memory of Poussin. The larger problem is what to do with the art-historical correctness of it all: the soft but plausible politics filtered through a philosophical idyll, the venerability of the source, the satisfyingly conceptual handling of the medium. And yet, if the parts all seem so right, then what needs be said about their sum? Indeed, what *can* be said, about it, after receiving the generosity of Wall's hermeneutic advance? Or, in simpler terms, what should we understand about the meaning of proletarian motherhood as structured "typologically" by Poussin's peripatetic philosophers?

In 1993, in a cautious assessment of the interview, Thomas Crow wrote: "Wall has proposed adventurous analogies with Poussin's *Paysage avec Diogène* (*Landscape with Diogenes*, 1648) and, by thematic extension from that prototype, with the peripatetic philosophers of antiquity, in whose stead he places the young welfare mothers impersonated by his models" (Crow 1993, 67). In Crow's opinion, this Poussin analogy is convincing as an account of how Wall came to make the picture—through "his *flânerie* [sic] by automobile in the outskirts of Vancouver"—but less so as a *reading* of the work. But other commentators are less cautious, transferring the source from a "spatial situation" Wall experienced empirically to the finished art object. Wall's artworks "elicit such classical paintings as Poussin's *Landscape with Diogenes*" (Brougher 1997, 28). And again: "With *Diatrobe*, Wall evokes Poussin's *Landscape with Diogenes* in the Louvre" (de Duve 2002, 40–41). Elicit *how* and evoke *to what effect* are never fully explained.

The problem is only exacerbated when the Poussin connection slips into readings of works other than *Diatrobe*. Consider these five: On *A Villager from Aricaköyü arriving in Mahmutbey-Istanbul, September, 1997* (1997): “This indication of a radiating star of possible narrative options, placed in the foreground of a vast landscape, gives this composition a suggestive depth reminiscent of the tradition of the historical landscape, Poussin especially” (Vischer and Naef 2005, 19). On *Holocaust Memorial and Jewish Cemetery* (1987): “The soft greens and blue hills set against architectural forms bring to mind the pastoral landscapes of Claude or Poussin...” (Burnett 2005, 35). Another variation on the theme restricts the connection to a subset of Poussin’s works: “The setting of Wall’s *The Storyteller* has obvious similarities to Poussin’s mature history paintings, as does, in my view, the suburban fringe landscapes that we find in *Diatrobe* (1985) and *A Hunting Scene* (1994)” (Vasudevan 2007, 577). Even when a point of contrast rather than comparison is sought, critics deviate little from this theme. On *Coastal Motifs* (1989): “...unlike the harmonically [sic] proportioned landscapes or seascapes of classical painters such as Nicolas Poussin or Claude Lorrain—or indeed his own previous, carefully constructed compositions—each of Wall’s topographical views of Vancouver suburbs or city-outskirts are ‘straight’ documentary views...” (Wagstaff 2005, 10). Finally, *A woman with a covered tray* (2003) is mentioned in the same breath as “Poussin’s landscapes with figures” (Newman 2007, 165)—especially perplexing since it is not at all clear that *A Woman* is in fact a landscape.

More recently, in a catalogue for an exhibition Wall’s enigmatic black and white photographs, Burnett took the Poussin reference one step further, comparing *Cold Storage* to Poussin’s *The Triumph of David* (1613-33). To illustrate the comparison, Burnett reproduced Poussin’s exuberant, colorful painting upside down and in black and white (Burnett 2007). Thus deformed, it provided a plausible compositional and chromatic match to Wall’s photograph. Given that Poussin’s painting has never and will never be experienced in this manner, it is hard to know what art-historical insights this artificial procedure ought to yield.

By now the problem should be evident. The Poussin association has shifted from the process of making *Diatrobe* to the finished work, then extended other painters, and finally applied to Wall’s art generally. But paradoxically, as repetition over time tightens the link between Wall and classical landscape painting, that link also becomes more abstract, less specific. And this is true for many of Wall’s works, including early breakthrough pieces like *The*

Destroyed Room. Iconographical “matching” has become the dominant trope in the literature on Wall, almost to the exclusion of other approaches. Throughout this process, the subject is lost, rendered invisible.

As a phenomenon of contemporary art discourse, it is fascinating in itself. Many of Wall’s works are based on known sources and enormous energy has been dedicated to unearthing these iconographic kernels, most of which have been planted by the artist himself.⁴² Most famous are the examples drawn from the catalogue for an early exhibition of Wall’s at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (1979), with a dense, longish introductory essay by the artist. It opens with the assertion about the importance of the subject, which I quoted above, and goes on to outline the artist’s inspiration, goals and choice of materials. Then follows a sequence of two-page spreads, mimicking in printed format the standard art-history slide comparison. Works by

⁴² Connections are also often made to other nineteenth-century French paintings, especially those of Edouard Manet, such as *Backpack* (1981-82) with *The Piper* (1866) (Burnett 2005, 17; Newman 2007, 53–54, 58; Wood 1984, 13) and *Déjeuner sur l’herbe* (1863) with both *The Storyteller* (1986) (Burnett 2005, 17; de Duve 2002, 46; Fer 2007, 74) and *Tattoos and Shadows* (2000) (Armstrong 2012, 718; Newman 2007, 224). *Backpack* has also been compared to the portraits of Anthony van Dyck (Ammann 1984). Wall’s *Dead Troops Talk (A vision after an ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, winter 1986)* (1992) has been found similar to Antoine-Jean Gros’ *Napoleon on the Battlefield at Eylau, February 9, 1807* (1808) (Burnett 2005, 58), *Raft of the Medusa* (1818-19) by Théodore Géricault (Newman 2007, 153; Crow 1993, 68), Goya’s *Disasters of War* (Criqui 2007, 20), and unflatteringly to the *grandes machines* of Meissonier by Rosalind Krauss (Krauss 1997, 32). The *Destroyed Room* (1978) and *The Death of Sardanapalus* (1827) are often linked, as I suggested in the opening pages of this chapter (Burnett 2005, 11; Fried 2008, 58; Vasudevan 2007, Hochdörfer 2003, 39; Wagstaff 2005, 8). Other works are tied to twentieth century American painting, such as *Fight on the Sidewalk* (1994) with the abstract monochrome paintings of Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell (Chevrier 2005, 24). Likewise, *Night’s* (2001) rich blacks have reminded one critic of Ad Reinhardt (Fer 2007, 76). An image comes to mind of curators flipping through catalogues of the old masters, looking for the “nearest equivalent in Wall” as Newman puts it, as he connects Manet’s *The Ragpicker* (1869) to Wall’s *Doorpusher* (1984) (Newman 2007, 54). In another example, Bürger claims Wall’s early panoramic landscapes refer to “Dutch landscape painting of the seventeenth century; to be precise, Wall monumentalizes and changes the principles of the Dutch lowlands as developed by Pieter Molijn and Jan van Goyen” and then confusingly offers a long catalogue of dissimilarities between them (Bürger 2003, 176). To say, as Bürger does, that Wall “replaces” older conventions with their modern counterparts does not adequately describe the exact nature of the difference between them, or how such differences should be understood. Most recently, one critic has seen Wall’s *Boy Falls from a Tree* simultaneously as both the doomed Icarus from the famously idiosyncratic canvas long attributed to Pieter Breugel the Elder (*Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*) and Yves Klein’s *Leap into the Void* (1960) (Vetrocq 2012).

Wall in the exhibition are reproduced in color on the right, with their sources, somewhat smaller, in black and white, on the left. So, for example, Wall's 1978 work *Picture for Women* occupies the right half of a two-page spread, facing an eclectic, but suggestive trio of sources with captions on the left: Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, Edouard Manet's *Bar at the Folies-Bergère*, Richard Avedon's *Portrait of Penelope Tree*. Although this catalogue is now extremely rare, facsimiles of the same pairs continue to circulate in magazines, catalogues, museum materials, and online (although Avedon's portrait is often left out, owing perhaps, to its associations with the "low" genres of fashion photography and celebrity portraiture).

What Wall did with this layout goes beyond framing or clarifying his work. It might be better described as a "packaging" of the experience for a particular reader, namely, the art historian. The friendly acceptance of his early statements is no doubt influenced by Wall's own fluency with art history and its methods, as demonstrated by the didactic presentation format of the 1979 catalogue.⁴³ His writings and interviews draw on Baudelaire, Hegel, Benjamin, and respond to the writings of contemporaries like Thierry de Duve, Jean-François Chevrier (Wall 2007), and above all, Michael Fried (Wall has called "Art and Objecthood" a "great essay" [Vischer and Naef 2005, 445; see also Wall 2003]). But despite the richness of these references, they present temptations that lead down the path of art-historical assessments to tautology: Wall's work is art-historically important because it validates art history. A survey of such assessments reveals the thinness of this conclusion. To quote just one example: "much large-format photography seems to have taken on the role of nineteenth-century painting, because contemporary painting is no longer in a position to do what nineteenth-century painting did, namely, to make statements about the world" (Groys quoted in Wall 2007, 299; for similar remarks see Heffernan 2008, 834; Brougher 1997, 24). Fed by identifiable quotations of art-historical sources, this narrative presents Wall's "tableau photography" as the answer to the crisis of the easel picture: the torch of the Western pictorial tradition passed from painting to photography, its ancient, human spirit surviving in a modern, technological body.

The dominance of the iconographic approach and its inevitable exclusions has drawn

⁴³ Wall studied for a PhD at the Courtauld Institute of Art from 1970-73 without, however, completing his degree. He taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design (1974-75), Simon Fraser University (1976-87) and the University of British Columbia (1987-89) (Vischer and Naef 2005, 477). He has since retired from teaching.

criticism, not only for the conservatism implied by notions like continuity of tradition and restitution of canonical forms, but also for its passive conformity with Wall's own statements about the merits of his work. Indeed, Elkins has even called Wall's work

a trap laid for art historians, especially those familiar with the key moments in the history of art that Wall likes to take as points of departure (even, one might say, those who helped frame those very moments). A number of Wall's photographs are almost predigested for art historical consumption... (Elkins 2005, 955)

Writing in the *New Left Review*, Julian Stallabrass accused this literature and its authors of lacking social awareness. "[T]he game of finding images that resemble other images is likely to be both endless and useless (except as artistic validation) without the discipline of a point that sits outside an art history" (Stallabrass 2010, 116), by which he means social or material context. Stallabrass' central worry, which is shared by Adrian Rifkin,⁴⁴ is that in the echo chamber of Jeff Wall literature, the notion of "criticality" itself is commodified and transformed into an empty sign that is circulated by way of consensus between artist and a community of commentators. The process empties texts of all critical substance and fills the resulting void with affirmation, a form of cultural capital that accrues to all participants—which is just to acknowledge that any consideration of "critical" realism in the context of Wall's work will have to work doubly hard to ground criticality as much as realism in social processes.

Without dismissing the literature on *Diatribes*, I nevertheless wish to take a different angle, to show how Wall's selection and use of sources blocks precisely the kind of interpretation that ought to be enabled by identifying them. For in the elaboration of its source in Poussin, the central feature of *Diatribes* has been lost: its subject. Thanks to the work of feminist art history, it is all too easy to see a pattern of discrimination at work, the canonization of white male artists as high-brow heroes and the corresponding dismissal of multi-racial female subjects, as either uninteresting or unimportant. In looking at *Diatribes* and seeing only and always Poussin the work's social subject—working-class mothers—is rendered invisible, and paradoxically so, since Wall's initial interest was sparked by their social invisibility, which he hoped to address.

⁴⁴ This article appeared online. In an attached commentary, Rifkin claims that his text was produced at the request of the *Oxford Art Journal* for an informal commentary, and later rejected it, supposedly for not being formal enough. Rifkin criticizes Wall in a frank tone unusual in print, dubbing him a "minor artist" (Rifkin n.d.).

But rather than identifying this as a failure of the artist or his interpreters, I will interpret it instead as a productive feature of Wall's work. In the next section I try to show how *Diatrobe* exhibits a peculiar interpretive difficulty, an illegibility, which both makes its subject elusive and provides a key to answering the question I posed above: what should we understand about the meaning of proletarian motherhood? By understanding illegibility as a source of meaning rather than merely an impediment to it, we will see how it allows us to access the subject dialectically, and how illegibility can be understood as a form of realism.

3.2 ILLEGIBILITY'S REALIST HISTORY

So far I have focused on a particular trope in the reception of Wall's work: iconographical "matching." But there is another thread woven into the otherwise honorific fabric of the literature on Jeff Wall that suggests a very different critical response. Rather than words of praise, what we hear is the failure of words altogether. Absent are the references to Old Masters. Instead, Wall's work is described by curators and critics as ambiguous, an enigma, and even more emphatically, as an "enigma associated with ambiguity" (Chevrier quoted in Wall 2007, 275, 290). Shepard Steiner describes the enigmatic effect more precisely as an "under-articulated meaning"—where meaning is present, but just out of reach (Steiner 2007, 140-41). To curator Thomas Weski, Wall's works feel "somewhat unfinished as if there were something unconcluded in their action" despite their slick technical perfection (Weski quoted in Roelstraete 2007, 61); these remarks are echoed by Chris Burnett: "Importantly, the narrative of each picture is next to impossible to ascertain. We cannot know what, exactly, is going on." (Burnett 2005, 72). Writer and curator Jeremy Miller likewise concludes that in Wall's best works, "the familiar appears unfamiliar, and the drama seems both real and strange, or inaccessible" (Miller 1988, 21). Presumably the iconographical matching should help ease this uncertainty, and yet, as we have seen, focusing on the source brought little clarity to the subject matter of the work. I will use the term "illegibility" to summarize the substance of these observations. I have lingered with the original language used by these various observers, to emphasize that illegibility is not equivalent to meaninglessness—quite the opposite—and that the failure of language is a telling

symptom. Not only is it central to the social content of Wall's work, it also has a tradition, and its tradition is realist.

Roman Jakobson probably stands at the source of this tradition, at least as far as it can be defined by a theoretical literature. In 1924, in an attempt to account for the wide diversity of objects labeled "realistic," Jakobson posited that progressive breaks in tradition tend to be seen as realistic, apart from considerations of depictive correspondence. For example, novelists introduced extraneous detail with increasing frequency over time, so that at a particular historical moment it felt realistic that in "[d]escribing Anna's suicide, Tolstoy primarily writes about her handbag" (Jakobson 1987, 25).

Decades later, in an analysis of Flaubert, Roland Barthes made essentially the same point about detail: "...it is the category of 'the real' (and not its contingent contents) which is then signified; in other words, the very absence of the signified, to the advantage of the referent alone, becomes the very signifier of realism..." (Barthes 1989 [1968], 148). Now Jakobson and Barthes were concerned with literature and it is hard to map this observation onto images—after all, what would count as an "inessential" detail on a pictorial surface?—but understood differently, the pictorial equivalent of Anna Karenina's handbag could be subjects that were previously regarded as inessential or extraneous in a social sense, such as laborers, prostitutes or welfare mothers.

Svetlana Alpers, working on a similar problem in the context of the early modern history of European painting, follows realism back in time, from Edouard Manet and Gustave Courbet, arriving finally in the seventeenth century, to discover that artists such as Velázquez, Rembrandt and Caravaggio exhibited certain "realist" features that would later be intensified in the



Figure 16 Caravaggio, *Conversion of St. Paul*, ca. 1600, oil on canvas, 230 cm x 175 cm. Santa Maria di Popolo, Rome.

nineteenth century (Alpers 1974). These features include frozen figures, an absence of narrative, interest in low subjects, and—no surprise—a heightened attention to detail. Interestingly, Alpers also associates these features with a failure or blockage of ekphrasis, the verbal (more precisely, rhetorical) response to a work of art. In this connection she quotes Bellori's famously disparaging comments about Caravaggio's *Conversion of St. Paul* in the Cerasi Chapel [fig. 15]:

“utterly without action”—that is, without *istoria*, or, features that would support narrative reconstruction (Alpers 1976, 15),⁴⁵ a statement remarkably resonant with the phrase Thomas Weski applied to Wall’s works, which I quoted above: “unconcluded in their action.” Alpers also finds another example in Vasari’s equally perplexed reaction to Giorgione’s frescoes: “...I cannot discover what they mean, whether they represent some ancient or modern story, and no one has been able to tell me....” (17). It seems that Bellori’s and Vasari’s reactions to these artists were not unusual, except perhaps in their documentation. Through these and similar examples, Alpers’ historical research appears to confirm Barthes’ theoretical point that the signs of realism are in some sense *without contents*, and thus cannot be recovered by language.

Whether Alpers has a good “realist” reading of these seventeenth-century artists concerns me less than the fact that one very important person reads these artists in exactly the same way: Jeff Wall. In 1999, an interviewer asked him about the importance of the Baroque in his thinking about art-making. He responded by insisting that he does not especially favor the Baroque as such, pointing out that many of his works lack the Baroque’s complexity, convoluted form, and distortion. But then, Wall qualifies these comments in an unexpected but revealing way:

...there is also a very “neo-realist” strain within what we think of as Baroque art. This is very strong in two of the greatest painters of the Baroque era, Caravaggio and Velázquez. Some of my interest is in the indefinable. The Baroque category is good for that. It doesn’t necessarily mean that everything is twisted and complicated. You can have a work that appears formally very plain and straightforward, but that contains those same knots, that sense of the ineffable, indefinable. (Wall 2000, 51)

The features Wall values in the Baroque—a plainness or straightforwardness that conveys something indefinable and ineffable—are the very same that Alpers uncovered in seventeenth century realism, after initially encountering them in recent scholarship on the nineteenth. While the plain and straightforward are obviously features we normally identify with realism, the indefinable and ineffable are not. With realism traditionally understood as an identity between representation and reality, straightforwardness would be understood as “transparency”—a direct passage from one to the other. But Wall’s and Alpers’ observations, although perhaps alien to

⁴⁵ Bellori was just the first in a long history of readings and misreadings that have accrued to *The Calling*. For an excellent summary of this historiography, see Pericolo (2011).

familiar accounts of realism, are consistent with the critical realism I have tried to develop in the introduction to this dissertation.

It is perhaps unsurprising then that Velázquez, Caravaggio and Manet were of particular importance to Wall, while Caravaggio and Courbet were models for early, proto-tableau photographs that Ian Wallace staged with Wall's help. In 1973 Wallace began exploring the possibility of making photographs on a very large scale, inspired by cinematic models. Around the same time, he attempted to make an actual film with Wall and another Vancouver artist, Rodney Graham, on the theme of marriage (Galassi 2007, 21; Lubow 2007, Cameron 1979, 31). Unfortunately, due to financial and practical causes, the project eventually ran into trouble (Wallace 2008c, 142). Wallace salvaged the footage, enlarging it and printing it on photographic paper. He then made a series of meta-images about the making of the first set, and installed the pieces as a horizontal frieze or film strip around the UBC Fine Arts Gallery.⁴⁶ This inspired further experiments, and in 1977 Wallace realized his first large-scale work based on an art-historical source, Caravaggio's *The Calling of Saint Matthew* [fig. 16].⁴⁷ Wall posed in the role of Christ.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ The final work was entitled *The Summer Script I & II* (1974). This work consists of two sets of six 119 x 175.5 cm panels, hand-colored with oil paint.

⁴⁷ The significance of scale in Wallace's work of this period is indicated by an undated catalogue prepared by Wallace's gallery (Nova Gallery, Vancouver) of works exhibited between 1974 and 1978, apparently for consideration for acquisition by the National Gallery of Canada. It divides up Wallace's visible oeuvre into two classes: "LARGE works" and "smaller works" (Nova Gallery [1978?]).

⁴⁸ Later in an interview for *The New York Times*, he maintained, "I probably wouldn't have settled for any other role" (Lubow 2007, n. p.). *The Calling* has been documented in only two exhibitions, which probably accounts for its relative obscurity: its debut at the Nova Gallery in 1978 (NGC Ian Wallace Artist File) and in Wall's recent co-curated exhibition, *The Crooked Path* (de Wolf 2011). In addition to the "Vancouver School" cohort, Wallace has identified the woman pictured as Naida Lindner, daughter of the Austrian-born Canadian painter Ernest Lindner (1897-1988) (Ian Wallace, *pers. comm.*).



Figure 17 Ian Wallace *The Calling*, 1977, gelatin silver print, 132 x 160 cm. The Rennie Collection, Vancouver.

To summarize: there is an unusual but compelling history of realism written in Wall's sources, which he has reconstructed for the purpose of crafting illegibility. Recognizing this realist lineage reconciles the two threads of the scholarship on his work—one of praise and one of perplexity—as two reactions to the same problem: illegibility. Among these sources, Manet deserves special mention, considering that his paintings provoked a similarly perplexed, reaction, although much angrier. Additionally, Wall has long admired Michael Fried, whose landmark essay “Art and Objecthood” he read as soon as it appeared (1967; reprinted in Fried 1998). Reconsidering Fried's influence retrospectively, Wall said: “when he made that surprising turn towards Manet and the pictorial art of the previous two centuries, that meant a lot to me as well.

Those moves became guidelines that helped me deal with my own situation” (Wall 2008, 47). Wall is most likely referring to an article Fried wrote on Manet’s sources (naming Velázquez and Giorgione among them⁴⁹) (Fried 1969). It appeared in *Artforum*, which, along with *Studio International*, was popular with Wall and his Vancouver cohort during the period (Wall 2000, 44). In the essay, Fried ambitiously framed his discussion not around reinterpretations of particular sources but around the broader question the utility of art-historical quotation. Why quote at all? Fried attributed the decision to a two-fold need to compete with the great art of the past but in a particularly contemporary way (in Manet’s case, through a notion of Frenchness). Fried countered historians who read Manet’s engagement with older art as arbitrary or frivolous and argued that this aspect of his work is as central to his overall project as realism or “painting as such” (Fried 1996, 27).

Given Wall’s familiarity with Fried’s and T.J. Clark’s work on nineteenth-century painting, it is hardly surprising that he chose Manet as a model for several major works, including *Picture for Women*, mentioned above. When asked retrospectively why he made this choice, Wall responded, “Manet was the first person who really understood Velázquez” (Wall 2000, 51), further illuminating his choice of sources—not just any Old Masters, but those who contributed to the relay of realism from the nineteenth century to the seventeenth. After modeling at least two major works on Manet’s paintings, Wall made *The Arrest* (1989) [fig. 17], which borrows elements from Caravaggio’s *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas* (1601-02) [fig. 18]. The choice of Caravaggio was probably the outgrowth of his friendship and early collaboration with Wallace. Although Wallace initially fretted that his friend’s commitment to pictoriality would calcify into a conservative, anti-modernism, he recently affirmed its success. “Questions of taste seem trivial in front of his pictures and we are forced to come to terms with the subject matter as such,” Wallace said, in a 2008 lecture. “Confronted with the power of his pictures, we are driven to interpretation” (Wallace 2008b, 45). I think Wallace’s choice of words is right, that we are *driven* to seek meaning in these difficult compositions. But driven where? And how? Even critics who praise them admit they are maddeningly elusive. Donald Kuspit was one such admirer, who praised Wall’s authenticity and passion, and yet was nevertheless moved to write,

⁴⁹ The Giorgione work in question is now attributed to the young Titian, as Fried noted in the republished version of his essay (Fried 1996, 56).

“His figures have an aura of evanescent hostility between themselves and toward us, which becomes all the more gripping by reason of its unspecifiable source” (Kuspit 1982, 54).



Figure 18 Jeff Wall, *The Arrest*, 1989, transparency in lightbox, 119 x 145 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

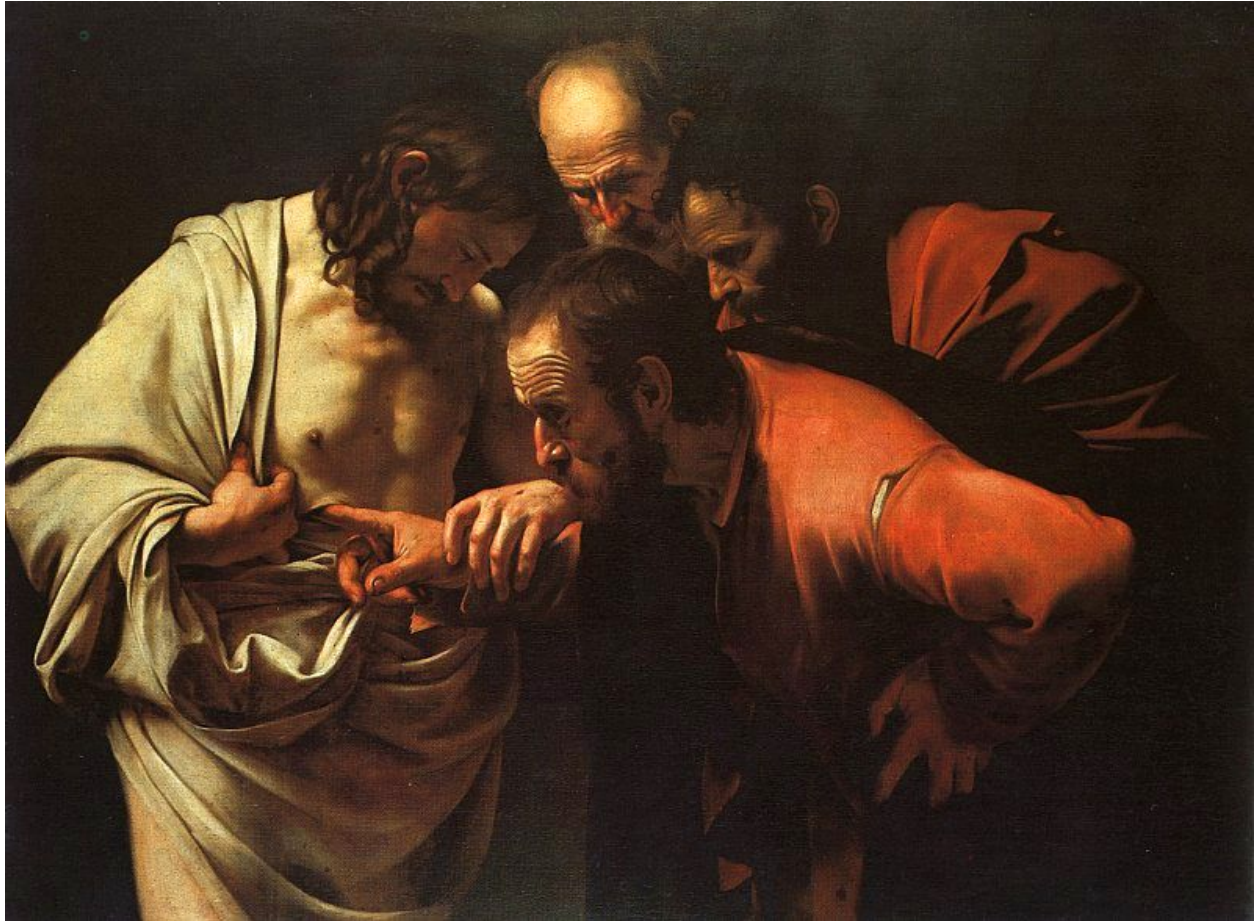


Figure 19 Caravaggio, *The Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, 1601-02, oil on canvas, 107 x 146 cm. Neues Palais in Sanssouci, Potsdam, Germany.

3.3 CINEMATOGRAPHY: CRAFTING ILLEGIBILITY

Although the collaborative film experiment with Graham and Wallace failed, it probably influenced Wall's practice of staging his photographs and may also help explain the latter's curious choice of "cinematography" to describe his process. Wall deploys this term in a startling variety of ways, connecting it to photography, conditions of (in)visibility, documentary, the tableau, mimicry, performance and the boundary between fact and fiction (de Wolf 2011, 70-71, 108-09; Wall 2007, *passim*; 2003). It does not designate "motion pictures" exclusively, nor does not exclude them by definition (Wall 2007, 269). Here I want to focus on Wall's characterization of cinematography as a paradoxical form of illusionistic montage, to demonstrate how Wall's

approach to his subject matter might align with an Adornian description of non-coercive intersubjectivity.

Wall's interest in cinema is well documented.⁵⁰ Perhaps idiosyncratically, he seems to view cinema as an approach to making pictures, rather than a medium defined by a technical support or with a unique ontology. Despite the fact that he clearly produces still photographs, not films, he has situated his use of digital imaging technology closer to motion picture editing than to photo-montage (Wall [1994] 2007, 50). In an interview with the artist Vik Muniz, Wall explained his preference for filmic montage over the photographic kind. "I wanted to use that technique more as it has been used in the cinema, which is more hidden, more in the service of illusionism. ...That way unlikely things and beings can be brought together even if logic, custom, and precedent seem to rule it out" (Wall 1994a, 50). Wall does not give examples of the "unlikely things and beings" in question, but the category seems broad enough to encompass objects, figures, gestures, modes and genres. The point is to select and incorporate things that would otherwise be prohibited by logic, custom or precedent, making palpable strangeness, while still managing to preserve pictorial integrity, and therefore, plausibility ("illusionism"). The primary way Wall achieves this seamlessness is by situating his figures in a rational, continuous space.

His preferences for illusionism place Wall at a distance from the montage and collage of the historical avant-gardes, a curious choice given his knowledge of Dada, and one-time proposal to write on John Heartfield during his Courtauld years (Wall 1994b, 276).⁵¹ Unlike Dada, Cubism or Constructivism, where contradiction lies on the image surface, in the shock of eloquent oil paint embracing the word on the street, or a geometrical figure that unexpectedly lunges into the third dimension, Wall's strategy locates contradictions deep within the works'

⁵⁰ According to Ian Wallace's recollections, Wall's interest in cinema emerged together with an interest in politics, during the summer of 1971 (Wallace 2008b, 33). His expressed admiration for particular filmmakers and cinematographers reveals the importance of cinema to his practice. These include Robert Bresson, John Cassavettes, the Italian Neo-realists, Stanley Kubrick, John Houston and others (Wall 2007). In his recent autobiographical exhibition at Bozar in Brussels (co-curated with Joël Benzakin), a room was dedicated to screening clips from an eclectic set of films from European and American directors (de Wolf 2011).

⁵¹ "I was not impressed by the hectoring graphic arts the way the Soviets did it, and even less impressed by the '70s and '80s versions. ... I had enough of that when I dropped my research on Heartfield in 1972" (Wall and Roberts 2007, 161).

structure, keeping his photographic surfaces placid and pristine and the illusionistic spaces behind them resolutely coherent. One logical and practical consequence of this choice is a tendency towards singularity, which Wall cultivates by dedicating only one picture to a theme, and by printing in exceedingly small editions.

Wall has been criticized for his controlled, directorial approach, and for his commitment to the single, unified work, both of which can appear aesthetically conservative and therefore politically regressive (Bryson 1997, Clark quoted in Wall 2002, 115-17, Solomon-Godeau 1988; Graham 2011, 8). Spectacular, complicit with dominant regimes of visibility and invested in categories of authorship and subjectivity, so goes the argument, Wall's art regresses behind the radical experiments of the historical avant-garde, who used photo-montage to break up space for a revolutionary aesthetic. The artist has defended himself by claiming that the avant-garde is not outmoded, rather, it has been internalized, surviving beneath a "manneristically normalized surface" (Wall 2007, 254). In other words what appears as a very late neo-classicism, is actually the consequence of accepting, not rejecting, the historical avant-garde as historical, to the point where its doctrines are equally taken for granted and open for revision. In another, later interview, he reiterated the point, connecting montage, unlikeness and visibility to the importance of subject matter. "I accept the picture in that sense, and want to make visible the discontinuities and continuities—the contradictions of my subject matter. The picture is a relation of unlike things, montage is hidden, masked, but present, essentially" (Wall 2007, 254).

Because subject matter is contradictory, and therefore not directly accessible to exiting iconographies, making it visible requires an oblique approach. Wall's solution, as we have seen, is cinematography: not a direct illustration of contradiction, but a mediation of contradiction through the unlikeness of things. If this mediation is successful, subject matter should register as something concealed but present (as opposed to unconcealed or immediately present). In other words, subject matter will be located at the very threshold of visibility. This is why Wall can claim that it is "masked, but present," which I take to mean that contradiction is not visualized or "illustrated," yet still registers through visual means. What this amounts to, paradoxically, is a double registration: an object is visible, and its invisibility is also, somehow, visible. We might also say: something is visually present and visibly absent—Kuspit's "unspecifiable source." (More on this below.)

Earlier I claimed that Wall's illegibility not only places him in a particular tradition of realism, but that it contributes something essential to the meaning of the work. Through a close reading of Wall's interviews I have outlined in abstract terms how he uses cinematography to craft illegibility, that uncertain space between the plausible and the peculiar. The next task is to demonstrate how this is achieved, to look again at *Diatribes* in an attempt to recover its illegibility, in hopes of retrieving its meaning and subject matter from the diversions of art-historical quotation. This will not be accomplished merely by shifting the discussion from Wall's form to his content or by discarding formalism in favor of social history. It is not enough to merely identify a figure as "working-class" or a "mother." An important part of the work's meaning is embedded in its illegibility, which demands a concrete account of the technical means by which object-priority can be communicated pictorially.

3.4 DIATRIBES REVISITED

To begin, let me inventory all the ways in which Wall does not follow Poussin's landscape with figures, attempt to reclaim illegibility and demonstrate the effects of cinematography. First, dramatically absent in Wall's response to Poussin is the lyrical expression of the natural world. The environment and the figures are caught, under bright, colorless sunlight, probably at high noon. Objects cast sharp shadows, exposing the bald, parched earth and articulating the ragged grasses almost to excess. Even as the glow of the back-lit transparency attracts our attention, something harsh and almost hostile makes itself felt in Wall's work. In the miserable industrialized landscape painting of the nineteenth century, the eye could still take refuge in the generous impasto.⁵² In *Diatribes*, there is no expressive pleasure in the medium, which has colonized every detail through raw photographic perfection, exposed on a flawless, glassy surface. Utterly stripped of anything lyrical, the photograph is denied even the modest inclination of the picturesque. Consequently, although monumental in scale, the

⁵² Thomas Crow suggests Vincent Van Gogh's *Outskirts of Paris* (1886) as a formal comparison piece for *Diatribes*, in the same article quoted above (Crow 1993, 67). He does not suggest it as a source.

photograph does not elevate the banal everyday by formalizing it as a satisfying crossing of gazes or of lines; there are no geometric blocks of shadows to remind us of fractured, cubist space, nor regular intervals of light and dark that might suggest the rhythms of music. Wall offers no such refined aesthetic pleasures, but instead preserves the everydayness of people and place with brutal clarity.

Moreover, *Diatrobe* is set in a highly uncertain space. While Poussin harmonized an idealized natural landscape with architecture that does not pose as conqueror or victim of it, the relationship between natural and built environment in *Diatrobe* is an uneasy competition. Pictorially, the trees threaten to swallow the rooftops beyond, while in the foreground, the grasses seem to have been shorn clean from the earth, with mounds of it piled awkwardly, suggesting convenience of development, not the necessity of natural processes. The setting is not obviously urban, nor suburban exactly, it might plausibly be on the edge of a suburb or warehouse district. We are confounded because of the presence of both naked earth and wild vegetation in the foreground and buildings of some kind in the background. It is neither here nor there, difficult to characterize as natural, industrial or residential.

Not only is the site uncertain, *Diatrobe* fails to announce itself as any particular genre. It is not clear that *Diatrobe* even qualifies as a landscape because the landscape is not really available for contemplation. The camera's low vantage point places trees, tall grasses and a few indistinct buildings directly in our line of sight, blocking access to whatever lies beyond. Landscape, such as it is, offers a functional spatial situation for the figures, but beyond that, it is practically invisible. At the same time, if the camera is too frustratingly near to resolve as a landscape, the framing is just slightly too wide to be a genre scene, and we feel our attention divided: the landscape distracts our attention from the figures, and vice versa. Thus, *Diatrobe* is not a satisfying landscape with figures; rather, it is a violation of cluster of conventions that we designate with the phrase "landscape with figures." It is difficult if not impossible to judge what kind of landscape this is, or where the mothers could possibly be going, or where they came from, and soon we run up against the unsettling question as to whether it even makes sense to attempt to reconstruct the scenario around such questions at all. For the strangeness of *Diatrobe*'s composition and framing and the meticulousness of its detail frustrate the habitual hermeneutic disposition, as if the subject itself were somehow incommensurable with the very procedures art history has developed to understand it.

Identifying the figures proves an equally difficult task. Earlier I identified the subject matter of this work, nominally, as “welfare mothers,” which overlooked a key difference between them: one of the women is a visible minority. Also, unlike the “speaking” woman, she does not hold a child. I strongly suspect that their various asymmetries are deliberately crafted, carving them out as individuals who have different identities but who, for the moment, are fused in the act of communication: as one woman talks, the other lists, and both appear equally active (I am tempted to say, absorbed. A “Friedian” reading would inevitably treat the women’s racial difference as the social equivalent to the outward facing card in Chardin: because the white woman does not notice the other woman’s racial difference, the absorptive effect is reinforced, etc.). Anyway, it is a lucid visualization of the dialectic of identity and non-identity: the two figures participate in sameness and difference, although it is unclear whether their difference had settled into some kind of equality or whether whiteness still carries a certain amount of privilege. (Perhaps the “speaking” woman is berating or verbally abusing her companion—it is impossible to know for sure.)

As a pictorial subject, in the history of photography at least, Wall’s “welfare mothers” have precedents. The most famous representation of poverty and maternity combined remains Dorothea Lange’s majestic portrait of Florence Owens Thompson, better known as “Migrant Mother” (1936) [fig. 19]. However, Lewis Hine’s *Madonna of the Tenements* (1911) is iconographically more resonant, because his mother holds a child as does Wall’s. Whether fierce or vulnerable, these famous mothers radiate a warm, protective care. None of them is walking and talking. Yet in *Diatrobe*, the “talking” mother presses the child securely to her hip in a gesture that falls well short of an embrace; it is a practical solution not an emotional expression and the energy that ought to be directed towards the child instead travels outwards through her open mouth and splayed first and second finger. Socially, perceived indifference of mothers to their children tends to draw negative responses: such mothers are callous, lazy or “unfit.” However, we can imagine that the mothers who are the least attentive are overwhelmingly so not by choice, but rather are tired after work (or a second shift), stressed by practical problems, or distracted while caring for other women’s children besides. They are also probably mostly poor.

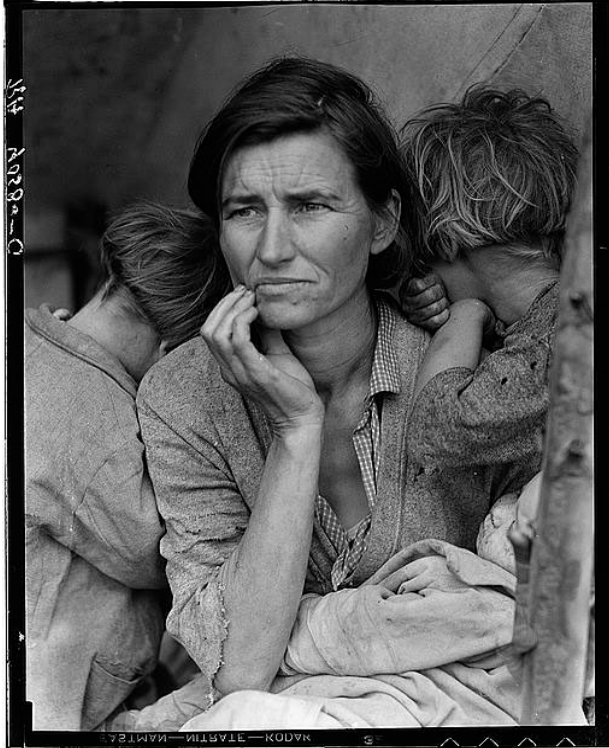


Figure 20 Dorothea Lange, *Destitute pea pickers in California. Mother of seven children. Age thirty-two. Nipomo, known as Migrant Mother, 1936*, digital file from an original 4 x 5 in. nitrate negative. Negative and original print held in Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D. C.

But according to a liberal-bourgeois conception of motherhood, mothers are not permitted to be indifferent to their children.⁵³ Only a correct, fully attentive, caring disposition towards the child brings motherhood fully into pictorial being. This is especially evident in Hine's *Madonna*, but Lange also participates. Although Florence Thompson's attention lies outside the frame and her children appear as precious appendages to her gesture, her expression is still one of concern; she is imagining their future and therefore "attending" to them in an

imaginative sense. Against these examples, Wall's talking mother, who lacks the "correct" maternal disposition of care and concern, is denied full iconographic status as a mother. So

if these are in fact welfare mothers that we see

in *Diatribes*, they resist identification as such, because their gestures and overall attitudes depart so sharply from those of the mothers we all know and love from the Western pictorial tradition. As Panofsky wrote, "If the knife that enables us to identify a St. Bartholomew is not a knife but a corkscrew, the figure is not a St. Bartholomew" (1955, 30).

So are these proletarian mothers or are they not? Indeed, I would argue, they are, but in their difference they accidentally also reveal Hine's and Lange's poor mothers to be a compellingly romanticized, bourgeois portrayal of the same: a vision of motherhood in the

⁵³ Indifference is not the same as neglect, but the body language of the first might stand in for the meaning of the second in some contexts. Beginning in the 1970s, mistreatment, including neglect, was reframed in American child-welfare legislation as an individual problem, beyond class, race or culture. Without overlooking the cases of child abuse that do occur in middle- and upper-class families, scholars acknowledge that neglect and abuse follow patterns that are exacerbated by poverty (Aviv 2013, 55-56).

middle class's own image, timelessly graceful and constant in their affections. Here is where I might claim that Wall's picture refuses such "ideological" visions and that his realism derives from his commitment to authenticity, to show things as they "really" are. Poor mothers are exhausted, under stress, pushed and pulled by the chaos of contingency. But valorizing Wall's realism because of its sociological accuracy just falls back on the same old ideas about the truthfulness of photography that have been permanently shaken by poststructuralism. This line of argument would also come up against the fact that the mothers are hired actors and thus, not "real" mothers at all. Finally, there is the issue of legibility: we would expect a highly accurate picture to be perceived as surprising, shocking even, but nevertheless recognizable as the subject matter in it. Yet earlier in this chapter I demonstrated how the subject matter of this work—proletarian motherhood—was virtually invisible to the majority of Wall's interpreters, who preferred, instead, to explore the quotation of Poussin, thereby compounding the problem that Wall's work hoped to address, namely, the problem of representing proletarian motherhood.

Understanding fully the accomplishment of *Diatribes* requires acknowledging, first, that representing proletarian motherhood is indeed a *problem*. Examples like Hine's and Lange's are compelling cases for the acceptance of conventions that speak to us in the old but still-powerful language of compassion and pity, or, at a stretch, admiration at the heroism of the downtrodden, rather than agency or self-knowledge. Hine's proximity to Madonna-and-child figural arrangements found in European painting is particularly sentimental (an effect enhanced in published versions by the resemblance of its cropping to the *tondo* format). They are compelling in part because of their legibility. Wall has made a different kind of image that does different work. By portraying the women walking and talking and by placing them in layered, perspectival space, he hoped to situate them pictorially in their alterity as occupying a location of objective, critical knowledge, the same location as Poussin's philosophers. In the interview with Barents quoted above, Wall argues along Marxist lines that this location of oppression is also one of objective insight, so mapping the social location of the philosophers onto that of the mothers could reveal the latter's "objective relation to the traditional aims of critical philosophy."⁵⁴ He

⁵⁴ Wall reiterated this point in February 1990, at a roundtable at the Vancouver Art Gallery with Terry Atkinson, Ian Wallace and Lawrence Weiner. When asked whether he understood "critical modernism" as the purview of an intellectual or cultural elite, Wall responded:

continues his statement, which I now repeat: “Thus, I could represent them, typologically, through the classicistic [sic] structure of the picture, as engaged in such discourse.” Wall reminds his interviewer that the Greek term for “diatribe” refers to an ancient form of critique, either a “vehement denunciation” or “rhetorical argument with an absent third party” (Wall 2007, 192). We can easily imagine the two women, despite their racial or individual differences, united in discussion by a common enemy not pictured.

This is not to claim, in sexist, Pygmalion fashion, that Wall, a white, bourgeois, male artist, has (actively) endowed a (passive, classed, raced) female subject with agency. In order to meet his goal he could not simply heroize the mothers, that is, symbolically endow them with a power through representation that they are otherwise denied⁵⁵ (thereby reinscribing powerlessness). *Diatribe*’s figures are not sisters to Rosie the Riveter, whose image posits but does not confirm the existence of practical female ability. Nor are they merely the modern, female equivalents of Poussin’s philosophers, despite their shared location. Wall did not make a straightforward image of active femininity, but an illegible one.

This has consequences. For one it suggests that activities like walking, talking and philosophizing remain alien to the concept of classed and raced motherhood, more generally, that activity and woman remain, despite decades of feminist work, “unlikely things” to each other—the contradiction of subject matter. It also suggests that although the image is strange to any number of socially dominant perspectives, *Diatribe* represents a creative form of life that knows itself, independent of how a liberal, bourgeois, patriarchal, academic discipline knows it. So Wall’s use of Poussin does not just resurrect the European pictorial tradition, but represents working-class motherhood as active, engaged with itself, perhaps even *knowing* itself, and hence for-itself, meaning “self-conscious” in the philosophical sense. In short, *Diatribe* is about a form of knowing that is other than the one given to us by power, and which, from our particular historical moment, cannot yet be recognized as knowledge as such. By attempting to fully, accurately, identify the figures *as* their identities, something inevitably escapes into alterity, or

It has to do with all kinds of battles that are going on everywhere, whether they happen to be in organized institutional forms or disorganized institutional forms; whether they’re in academic forms of literacy, professional forms of literacy, or unprofessional, let’s call it “street” forms of literacy. I don’t think those are the dividing lines. These things are connected to each other objectively, in my view. (Wall quoted in Atkinson at. 1992, 42-43)

⁵⁵ On this point I depart from Seamon (1992).

what Adorno would call non-identity [das Nichtidentische]. Besides being literally invisible, the experience of motherhood, poverty, blackness, or any one of Wall's other social subjects, constitutes a subject-location with particular, real experiences that necessarily escape those who do not occupy that same location as the middle-class or art-educated viewer. Confronted with *Diatrobe*, a middle-class viewer might see something different from an art historian, just as a mother might see something different from a woman who's never conceived. Just as powerfully do racial identity and class impact one's perception. And yet the central motif of Wall's image is also unavoidably utopian: not just a diatribe, but communication, and moreover, communication across differences. As one woman talks, the other listens, and the power of her listening intensifies the effect of the message. It would be almost too easy here to drift into an interpretive posture that takes *Diatrobe* as an illustration for social intersectionality: the women engage with each other as two women, but as bearers of different racial identities. That interpretation would be *too* easy, and not quite right.

What this amounts to is that Wall's figures are both welfare mothers and they are not, their contradictions "masked, but present." One of the remarkable features of *Diatrobe* is that the invisibility of Wall's figures is not an allegory for a reality that cannot be represented directly but a passage from one reality to another, for it is only in their invisibility as artistic subjects that they are visible as real social subjects, because it is a real social feature of welfare mothers that they be invisible. At the same time, they are utterly visually present in their formal clarity: as a photographic description of two women in a landscape, Wall's photograph could not be more precise. The mothers' identity is represented paradoxically, or better yet, dialectically, as the simultaneous presence of presence *and* of absence, or in the formulation I proposed above, as visually present and visibly absent.

There is more than a little Adorno in Wall's mid-1980s writings, especially two major essays from the years surrounding *Diatrobe*: *Dan Graham's Kammerspiel* (1982, published Wall 1991) and "Unity and Fragmentation in Manet" (Wall 1984). The first uses eloquently dialectical language to condemn the irrationality produced through the rationalization of the built environment while the second frames Manet's corruption of the nineteenth-century nude as a negation that emerges from within the Salon's artistic decorum rather than a challenge from without. For comparison, here is Wall, from *Kammerspiel*, on the failure of conceptualism's original utopian goals: "art which challenges the existing order in its own name as art will find

its inherent limit in absolute negativity, a negativity which is unfree in relation to the unfreedom which provokes it" (Wall 2007, 72). And Adorno in a passage from *Aesthetic Theory*: "By their very existence artworks postulate the existence of what does not exist and thereby come into conflict with the latter's actual nonexistence" (1997, 59).

There is some concern among leftist critics that Wall has moved away from the Marxism of his earlier work and closer to the ahistorical art history of Michael Fried (see Osborne's remarks in his interview with Wall [Wall 2007, 48]; see also Roberts' remarks in Wall and Roberts 2007, 159). But it is precisely Wall's proximity to Adorno that makes his synthesis of Fried's formal concerns with latent social subject matter make sense: Adorno is the member of the Frankfurt School most famous for his pessimism; even at moments when his peers were optimistic about the possibilities of collective political action, he was skeptical. Adorno is often seen as Clement Greenberg's European mirror-image (Adorno was equally entrenched in post-war cultural politics but a lot more comfortable with Marxism). In the conclusion of this dissertation I suggest a repositioning of Fried that places him closer to Adorno, but from Wall's point of view, all three were equally close and equally distinct. On his admiration of both Michael Fried and Robert Smithson Wall says: "I didn't really take sides.... My own photography was probably shaped in some ways by the tension involved in these rather contradictory affections" (Wall and Roberts 2007, 158).

I have tried to argue that Wall's work is more concerned with conditions of visibility and knowledge than of fact and fiction, despite what we might conclude given his use of actors, sets, and so on. It is not hard to see how the truth of invisibility resonates with the priority of the object, which cannot be separated from the subject, but which mediates subjectivity and hints at the non-identical. If the reality of the mothers is not only represented through their invisibility, but enacted performatively by the very structure of the work, then the hermeneutic uncertainty we feel in its presence may indicate a subjective mediation is at work. We may recall how Adorno associated the priority of the object with a corresponding subjective vulnerability. A part of this vulnerability can be attributed, I think, to the permanent distance between subject and object, which is measured by the uneven distribution of social, political and economic power. As Timothy Hall points out, this distance can be one way of interpreting the dispute between Adorno and the champion of realism, Georg Lukács. Since Lukács identified the working class as the universal subject of human history, the coming identification of subject and object would

be accomplished with the progression of revolutionary consciousness towards a classless society. Adorno, by contrast, viewed the space between subject and object, the irreducible *aura*, as the very location of the possibility of any social transformation (Hall 2011, 74).

Object-priority and our ability to experience it therefore carry ethical substance. Recognizing and accepting object-priority would mean recognizing welfare mothers as philosophers of a kind, with their own consciousness and their own reality and would entail, therefore, a change in social organization that would impact the language we use, the way we distribute urban space, who we blame for our problems and how address child welfare. This is because the difference between a minority reality and the reality of the majority is shared by both sides. That mysterious “unconcluded” something that Weski felt in the action of Wall’s work is the emergence of alterity from invisibility to visibility, not yet realized, but powerfully felt in its incompleteness. Completion of that project, appears in our time, as permanently delayed. Even in Wall’s art, which I have argued suggests such a thing is, the event itself remains a beautiful illusion, just as the models perform their roles as mothers, or as the whole composition announces itself as a Poussin.

I hope my argument will not be read as something like the claim that *Diatrobe* is an arena in which all these failures, negativities and absences are “played out.” Such readings accept too readily the romantic image of failure as the ultimate success. Wall’s realism does not lie in representing the difference between art history’s mothers and real mothers and thereby capturing the “realism” of the total situation from a higher perspective (once again, a symbolic *Aufhebung* that protests impotently against real social conditions), but rather in making an image that permits difference to remain concealed, fugitive and other. The lesson we can glean from *Diatrobe* is that there is no representation of difference as such that would finally overcome difference and thus achieve perfect realism or absolute objectivity. But there is a representation of difference that permits the object to expand beyond the limits of the frame, even beyond the limits of tradition, to fully assume its autonomy from the subject.

What interests me are the possibilities for experiencing our own otherness to ourselves, and therefore, experiencing others not as something threatening and alien but as a part of our own constitutions. This is increasingly difficult but also increasingly urgent in a polarized and terrorized world in which we cannot help but imagine and hope for better alternatives, despite our bleakest predictions. To return one last time to the interview Wall gave with Barents, we hear

Wall expressing similar concerns: “I want to express the existing unfreedom in the most realistic way.” And then he clarified: “By ‘very realistic’ I mean an image which shows the inner contradictions of this figure, its socially determined quality, and also its otherness to itself” (Wall 2007, 195). Realism on these terms is not an art of similarity or “fit” between reality and representation by forcibly and imperfectly subsuming object to subject, but an art of non-identity and otherness, that permits social reality to always exceed representation, and therefore, to be both visible and concealed, and more fully itself.

4.0 ALLAN SEKULA: REALISM AS CONSTELLATION

There is a running argument in the writing and art of Allan Sekula, apparent in his earliest photo-text narratives and elaborated most fully in his magnum opus, *Fish Story* (1989-1995), about the ongoing importance of materialism in contemporary life and thought. In his writing and interviews, the importance of materialism appears often as a historical-materialist emphasis on the determining (but never absolutely determining) power of production, consumption, markets and exchange. In his photographs, this often translates into motifs that might be read as “crudely” economic, for example, machines, factories, transport vehicles and so on. He also chooses, over and over again, to photograph people working, or less often, not working, in many cases enduring more than enjoying their inactivity after their jobs vanished in the process of industrial rationalization. But the ongoing importance of materiality is also often emphasized in a subtler way, in the very form the work takes: a complex ensemble of heterogeneous materials that refuse to accommodate any known reading strategies. Or even any readers. While the work is not hostile, it is still far from easy viewing. For example, captions appear at the end of a suite of many photos, isolated as a list from the images they identify, so that one cannot look and read at the same time. One must move about a space in order to stitch the parts together, or actively flip back and forth between pictures and captions if they are encountered in book form. Often, the sequences of images that constitute a single “work” run into the dozens, requiring long, intense periods of looking and reading. Here, we are not being offered an experience of an artwork but instead find ourselves pressed into its service. The very form the work takes, itself takes work.

Several commentators have noted how *slow* Sekula’s art feels, how much it asks of one’s attention. Kaja Silverman, for example, experienced the pace of slide changes in Sekula’s slide projection piece *Waiting for Tear Gas* (1999–2000) (13 seconds) as slow enough to take on the force of proto-political resistance (perhaps like a factory slowdown in the spectacular production

of consumer experience?) while simultaneously inducing a meditative state (Silverman 2004, 192-93). Another one of Sekula's extended works was even more demanding: the multi-panel *Shipwreck and Workers*, installed for documenta 12 (2007) on the hill at Bergpark Wilhelmshöhe [fig. 20]. The dramatic 200m drop, which offers a beautiful vista of Kassel and the Schloss Wilhelmshöhe in one direction, also creates a daunting uphill hike in the other, which Hilde Van Gelder later described as "a strenuous physical effort—the climb uphill was disturbingly steep and exhausting" (Van Gelder 2009, n. p.). The installation extracted physical exertion from its visitors through its arrangement and directionality: the images were placed in a row at considerable intervals from bottom to top, facing the downward slope. Sekula staggered the placement of the panels so that they could not be seen all at once, from the bottom of the hill. Thus placed, they could only be seen by someone climbing upwards, so aesthetic contemplation and physical exertion were rendered synonymous, as one could only be arrived at through the other. This clever placement of the monumental images of workers in a cultivated site of aristocratic leisure (built up in three stages throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries) required that viewers accept physical resistance and the slowness that inevitably overcomes tired, laboring muscles. Having arrived at the top, one saw only the panels' backs, painted black, with orange supports [fig. 21].



Figure 21 Michael Hußmann, Bergpark Wilhelmshöhe, showing Allan Sekula's *Shipwreck and Workers* (Version 3 for Kassel).



Figure 22 Michael Hußmann, Bergpark Wilhelmshöhe, Kassel, during *documenta* 12, 2007, showing the backs of *Shipwreck and Workers*.

Materiality, then, is operating at a number of levels in Sekula's practice: as the thematic material of the work, as affective structure and as an embodied history "performed" with the help of its viewers. About three-quarters of the way through the first half of a long essay called "Dismal Science" included in *Fish Story*, Sekula summarized his argument about the importance of materiality in a statement that could be taken as a program for his project as a whole:

My argument here runs against the commonly held view that the computer and telecommunications are the sole engines of the third industrial revolution. In effect, I am arguing for the continued importance of maritime space in order to counter the exaggerated importance attached to that largely metaphysical construct, "cyberspace," and the corollary myth of "instantaneous" contact between distant spaces. I am often struck by the ignorance of intellectuals in this respect: the self-congratulating conceptual aggrandizement of "information" frequently is accompanied by peculiar erroneous beliefs: among these is the widely held quasi-anthropomorphic notion that most of the world's cargo travels as people, by air. This is an instance of the blinkered narcissism of the information specialist: a "materialism" that goes no farther than "the body." In the imagination, e-mail and airmail come to bracket the totality of global movement, with the airplane taking care of everything that is heavy. Thus the proliferation of air-courier companies and mail-order catalogues serving the professional, domestic and leisure needs of the managerial and intellectual classes does nothing to bring consciousness down to earth, or to turn it in the direction of the sea, the forgotten space. (Sekula 2002b, 50)⁵⁶

Maritime space is a motif of resistance to the dominant postmodern view that reality is produced by language, that space is virtual, that bodies are formed by signs, that identities are as infinitely mutable as our online avatars, and perhaps above all, that we have transitioned from an industrial to a postindustrial age, dominated by the "knowledge economy" in which work is transformed into creativity and play. The motif of the sea, that heavy and lazy fluid body, constitutes an obsolete "forgotten space" that pushes against the dominant image of instantaneity, proximity and weightlessness suggested by air travel and cloud computing, but

⁵⁶ He reiterated this point in 2002: "we are material beings: where does our energy come from? ...all our energy is extracted from the earth and transported in bulk" (Sekula 2002a, 32-33).

also supplies a cluster of visual and philosophical tropes to be used in the recovery of a historical materialist program.

Superficially, Sekula's old-fashioned, even ancient, economic spaces, objects and activities suit the equally obsolete mode of realism, in a historically sanctioned alignment of "neglected form and neglected content."⁵⁷ But this comfortable association does little to explain how the artist rescues either form or content from neglect, nor does it explain how his work encounters the changed, contemporary cultural context without appearing outmoded. Commentators, including Van Gelder⁵⁸ and Bill Roberts⁵⁹ have tried to describe Sekula's work as a sophisticated realism that accommodates poststructural principles. Benjamin Buchloh attempts something similar, deploying the term "critical realism" to account for Sekula's attention to the way that both linguistic and concrete institutional structures shape their subjects. He situates Sekula in a legacy of early twentieth-century factographic photography while showing how the artist adapts this older model in the present age of "fallen facts" (a position he reasserted in his recent obituary in *Artforum* [Buchloh 2014]). Nevertheless his approach is still struggles to reconcile reality with linguistic constructionism, exposing a continued reliance on the problematic notion that realism requires adequacy of signifier to signified. In the end, he

⁵⁷ This phrase comes from Tümlir (1996, 4). See also Möller and Rosenbaum (2011, 64) and Bromfield (1998, 7) for similar remarks.

⁵⁸ Van Gelder describes Sekula's critical realism as a research method and argues that he conducts an investigation, producing "an actual, personally experienced record of it" and this personal inflection permits the artist to "critically reflect on reality" (2007, 303). For Van Gelder, photography is realistic because it is an indexical trace of reality, so that photography's complexity is symmetrical with the complexity of reality: "The photo can mirror back the paradoxes of daily life because it emanates from that life" (Van Gelder 2001, 175). See also her comments, co-authored with Westgeest in *Photography Theory*: "An analog photo is always or almost always an automatically created, 'realistic' image, because it is a true-likeness reproduction of reality. Yes, this is only so thanks to the fact that the photo is able to physically or indexically record that reality—indeed, in a highly depictive way" (Van Gelder and Westgeest 2011, 35).

⁵⁹ Roberts must argue that Sekula's representations are adequate to their subjects while countering changes of naïve realism, and somewhat predictably, his way out follows the fiction-as-realism approach, with "self-reflexivity" standing in for "fiction." Discussing a poster used for the exhibition of *Fish Story* at Berkeley, he writes that Sekula's activist art is "equally dependent on its communicative force as on the adequacy of its testimony to the subject's political complexity, as recorded in the visual and textual content." And: "Sekula here offers a model of photographic visibility that, by recognizing its own inescapable inadequacy, thereby strives to be adequate to the magnitude and complexity of the subject at hand (2010, 12).

must resort to treating Sekula's work as a "paradox of realistic montage" (2002, 199).⁶⁰

If Sekula's work somehow mobilizes older realist traditions or idioms to "represent" material processes in the age of information, then we might say he is making visual art about something that resists visualizations, trying to press the fantasies of the information class back into the laboring body that it has rejected, in which case we are securely, if not comfortably, in the realm of the non-identical. Sekula's occupation with things that are absent or unseen bring his practice within the theoretical field of critical realism I have tried to construct in this dissertation. Beginning with the fragmented and extended form his work takes, I wish to consider Sekula's practice as a form of critical realism that draws together a "constellation" of heterogeneous phenomena to arrive at the object dialectically. The term "constellation" comes from Adorno, for whom "constellative" writing was a powerful alternative to a philosophy of identity-thinking. As I elaborate below, it is less analysis than a dynamic engagement with its object, an engagement that transforms it, with the ultimate aim of passing from theory to praxis.

Constellative writing emphasizes heterogeneity and is therefore eminently suited to Sekula's complex assemblages of images, texts, audio and found materials, which he began

⁶⁰ Buchloh began writing about Sekula's realism as early as 1984, joining his and Fred Lonidier's photography within an Althusserian frame of critical resistance (Buchloh 1984). Sekula's *Sketch for a Geography Lesson*, for instance, "asked the viewer/reader to confront the reality of the reference as much as the reality of the sign" (1984, 9). More recently he argued that Sekula's "realistic interventions" operate both at the linguistic and practical level, addressing both "social subjects and spaces and their conditions of experience *as well as* the linguistic and institutional conventions" which he compares to the difference between structuralism and poststructuralism, or, with Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault's criticism respectively (Buchloh 2002, 196). But it is hard to make sense of this emphasis placed on "as well as" precisely because for Foucault, conditions of experience include linguistic conventions, which are grounded in concrete practices, or discourse. In any case, critical to Buchloh's understanding of Sekula's realism is the artist's cultivation of technical facility, consistent with an older tradition that had faith in photography's inherent realism. It seems odd to assume the integrity of this tradition when the relationship between photography and reality is exactly what is at issue. Buchloh writes that Sekula's

technical execution emphasizes photography's unique disposition towards the real and recognizes those photographers of the past (e.g., Walker Evans) whose artisanal skills corresponded visibly to their trust in both medium and method: skills with which they approached their task at providing access to a documentation of the real and their confidence in the possibility of developing an understanding of social reality" (Buchloh 2002, 196).

making in the early 1970s, initially by combining photographs with panels of text.⁶¹ *Aerospace Folktales*, which I analyze in part below, consists not only of photo and text panels, but also has an “installation” presentation, which includes potted plants and a director’s chair. But what is particularly powerful about constellative thinking is that it avoids construing interpretation as a “layer” to be placed over an otherwise objective state of things “out there.” If we apply this idea to visual art, this means avoiding the idea that the artistic substance of a work lies in its “expression,” or that it must be derived from an artist’s subjective experiences of an objective reality that pre-existed him. Both notions would merely reinforce the stale division between objective and subjective reality, further amplifying the old idea that realism would only be satisfied by a match between them. Rather, I will argue that Sekula’s practice, beginning with *Aerospace Folktales*, models realism differently, in three distinct ways: as an ensemble of heterogeneous materials that encounter each other around an object, by repositioning subjects and objects so as to reveal their mutual emergence in dependence, and as a model that becomes practical.

Others have applied the term critical realism to Sekula’s work in various ways, according to a range of concerns—I have mentioned a few already (Van Gelder 2009, Holschbach 2008, Quick 2008, Vishmidt 2008, 26; Baetens and Van Gelder 2006, Begg 2005, Baudson 2003, Buchloh 2002, Campbell 2002, Rattemayer 2002). In the artist’s own usage, “realism” is often preceded by modifiers like “critical” or “social”—sometimes both.⁶² Although in 2002 he expressed ambivalence towards the term “critical realism” (Sekula Interview 2002 Waintrop, 3) he nevertheless participated in a 2005 conference that used the term in its title and accompanying

⁶¹ The complexity of his work and its use of long sequences incorporating various media and styles have been noted by commentators and described variously as a “montage principle” (Baetens and Van Gelder 2005, 83), a “concatenation” (Gintz 2003), “hybrid” (Silverman 2004, 192), “assemblage” (Roberts 2010, 13), “heterogeneity” (Römer 2001) and an “ensemble” (Kester 1987, 10).

⁶² For example, in an interview with Benjamin Buchloh, Sekula said, “[t]he key choice I made in the seventies was for documentary social realism, founded in the intuition that this supposedly exhausted genre contained submerged possibilities” (Sekula 2003a, 38). More recently, Sekula was quoted in *The Guardian* as saying, “I saw the path of symbolism as one that led to hermeticism or a retreat from the social. ...I was trying to defend a critical social realism” (Sandhu 2012, n. p.).

publication.⁶³ Most importantly, he explicitly distinguished his concerns and practice from the winking treatment of fiction as a “higher” reality, which he called a “cretin paradox.” “By the eighties, documentary had become a more or less “decadent” genre,” he told Buchloh. “What passed for self-consciousness in contemporary photography was an endless reiteration of the Cretan paradox, but with a hierarchical twist: ‘All photographers are liars. I am an artist who uses photographs. Therefore I am smarter than the Cretan photographer who thinks she [sic] is telling the truth’ (Sekula 2003a, 39; also quoted in Sekula 1998, 21).⁶⁴ (This reprises exactly a quote Jakobson once attributed to Dostoevsky’s “pseudo-realism”: “I am a realist, but only in the higher sense of the word” [Jakobson 1987, 24].) What is hierarchical about this is that it implicitly constructs a “naive lower-class positivism” against which it affirms its middle-class superiority, endorsing class difference (Sekula 1997, 52). More recently he reiterated his position, echoing the admonition of Stimson and Kelsey I quoted in the Introduction. “Proving and reproving that photographs don’t tell the truth, which is what I think a good number of artists using photograph still attempt to do, I find a fairly trivial exercise. It’s not interesting to me.” Ultimately, he concluded, the notion that “photography” represents coherent and consistent set of set of truth-telling effects is sterile. “The meta-truth of the matter is that it’s neither here nor there. There are conditions under which photographs deliver very coherent and very precise truths” (Sekula 2011). These conditions are the subject of this chapter.

4.1 AEROSPACE FOLKTALES

Allan Sekula’s earliest uses of photography derived from the practical need to document

⁶³ This conference, entitled Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: Around Allan Sekula’s Photography, was held in Leuven, September 2005, and a corresponding publication appeared the following year (Baetens and Van Gelder 2006).

⁶⁴ He reiterated this formulation in his remarks at Scripps College Humanities Institute, during a 2005 conference on “The New Documentary Impulse.” His comments were in response to Alexandra Juhasz, professor of media studies at Pitzer College, who had presented material from a co-edited volume entitled *F is for Phony: Fake Documentary and Truth’s Undoing* (2006). His notes from the event read: “History is untrue fake history can be true. Cretan paradox / community of skeptics in built [sic]” (Sekula 2005).

his conceptual, performance art practice. In other words, his use of photography was not very different from the practices of older conceptual and performance artists, such as Yoko Ono, Vito Acconci or Sol Lewitt. In Sekula's early pieces such as *Box Car* (1970) and *Meat Mass* (1971), the relationship between image and text was straightforward: the text described some performative action while the photographs stood as proof that it was realized. *Meat Mass*, for example, consisted in this amusing but not frivolous, quasi-criminal act of deliberate waste: "Over a period of several weeks, expensive cuts of meat were stolen from a supermarket and stored in a freezer. The thawed steaks were thrown beneath the wheels of freeway traffic." The photographs show essentially this: the heist, the highway, the flattened flesh, transformed from luxury fare into raw material of no value. *Meat Mass*, in particular, bears strong resemblance to Ed Ruscha's *Royal Road Test* (1967), in which the artist documented the broken remains of his Royal typewriter, which had been thrown out the window of a speeding car.⁶⁵ The performance was singular and temporal, so the book *Royal Road Test* stands in as its enduring form.

In 1973 Sekula began to move away from these simple formats. *Aerospace Folktales*, made during his second year as an MFA student at the University of California San Diego (UCSD), is different and vastly more complex in its use of diverse materials set in complex relationships, a format that Sekula would later come to call the "sequence."⁶⁶ This quasi-autobiographical piece tells the story of his family's experience of the 1970s recession, when his father was unemployed. A materials engineer, Ignace Sekula had worked for the US military and later for the aerospace company Lockheed, which was at the time a major American defense contractor and key employer in southern California. Financially overextended and facing

⁶⁵ Sekula claims not to have encountered *Royal Road Test* until later, although he knew of Ruscha's other books in the 1970s. His early exposure to photography was primarily through books, since there were few opportunities to see original prints in exhibition in California at the time. During his time at UCSD he worked in a library, encountering a broad range of printed sources, including *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Walker Evans and James Agee, 1941), *Nothing Personal* (Richard Avedon and James Baldwin, 1964), *Tulsa* (Larry Clark) and *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles* (by Kurt Tucholsky and John Heartfield, 1929) (Sekula 2003a, 23).

⁶⁶ More research would be needed to date his work from 1973 more exactly. It is unclear as to whether *Aerospace Folktales* represents a watershed in Sekula's practice, or whether he returned to making the image-text pieces afterwards. Two additional pieces made the same year include *Masculine/Feminine Life in the Suburbs* used a simple image-caption format and some works had no text at all (*Portraits of Salespeople*, *Untitled Slide Sequence*, both 1973).

insolvency, it shed workers, including educated white-collar workers like engineers (Adams 1981). Summarizing in this fashion makes the piece sound thematically more resolved than it actually is; the “telling” of the story unfolds in fragments across photos, interviews, reproductions of found images, and quotes. Sekula’s work is also complicated by the fact that it exists in book and exhibition format. The latter is composed of framed prints, objects, and texts. As with *Fish Story* and other sequence pieces, the exhibition and print versions are similar, but not identical. But the interpretation of *Aerospace Folktales* that follows should apply equally to both versions.

The sequence opens with an introduction to Lockheed through a promotional publication, which Sekula has photographed. It is accompanied by a quote celebrating the corporation. Then, in captions and photography we meet Sekula’s father and mother and are given a tour of their family home. Unlike *Masculine/Feminine Life in the Suburbs*, which used a simple, consistent image-caption format throughout, *Aerospace Folktales* varies the sequence of image and text, we are presented with, for example, three image-caption sets, followed by several photographs on their own, followed by photographs in pairs, followed by photographs of photographs. In the print version, Sekula’s fondness for photographing photographs adds new layers of complexity, since these are often of “found” photographs printed in books, which then appear, of course, printed in (his) book. Here I want to emphasize that the complexity of this sequence derives not only from the heterogeneity of the materials themselves, but from the heterogeneity of relationships Sekula constructs between them, so that the appearance of an object-type A in relationship to B and C says less about it than we might wish, since its next appearance will require understanding it vis-à-vis object-type *b* and object-type D. Its function and meaning in each case are not absolutely different, but also not the same. (I elaborate on the consequences of this structural complexity below.) *Aerospace Folktales* concludes with interviews conducted by Sekula with his father and mother.

The interviews are extremely compelling, in part because their language is informal and it feels fresh and in part because we hope the parents will illuminate or contest some of what Sekula has just shown us in the pictures, perhaps even animating the piece with the tensions of a family drama. The young artist gets the last word, in the form of a stream-of-consciousness “commentary” on his parents’ ideology, industry, labor and photography. In this commentary, Sekula explains that photography cannot capture ideology, so his words must stand in as

supplement. However, this does not mean the text will explain the photographs, for example, by telling us the context in which they were made, their technical specifications or what the photographer was thinking while he made them. In any case, Sekula insists that no single interpretation will fit this work:

i do not think that i can provide you with an object with no relation other than an art relation to your world because i cannot provide you with *an* experience because you will relate to this differently depending on who you are if you are the president of lockheed you will relate to this in a different matter from the manner of an engineer if you are an important professor you will relate to this in a different manner from the manner of a student if you are a pizza cook you will relate in a different manner from the manner of a sociologist if you are a man you will relate in a different manner than the manner of a woman and so on (Sekula 2003b, 161; emphasis original)

The argument seems clear: it is impossible to experience something as “pure art” because every experience of art is inflected by the individual viewer’s facticity. But there are still open questions about how we should interpret this in light of the work. If this is true of an aesthetic experience, is Sekula claiming the same for everyday experiences? This seems consistent with other features of the work. Flipping back to the pictures, we consider them again in light of this question. The materials are personal, drawn from his own family and their experiences. The several pictures taken inside the family’s home, with all manner of personal effects, including family photographs, a corkboard with reminders about doctors’ appointments, and a photograph of Ignace’s resumé, lend the sequence a perspectival intimacy. It is also reinforced by other points in the text. Sekula’s reflections on his father’s interview is emotionally inflected, by turns exasperated, intrigued, disappointed and sympathetic. He does not pretend to be objective. His text seems to claim that no one can be. Everyone’s experiences will be primed by their personal backgrounds.

This reading is also aligned with the parents’ interviews, which are not only deeply personal but reveal a considerable difference between how each perceives their family’s economic situation. At one point in her interview, Sekula’s mother describes her search for affordable health care, starting at the best hospitals and gradually turning to public health services and the Veterans Affairs hospital as her resources shrank (Sekula 2003b, 151). Sekula’s father, for his part, explains his scheme to re-employ technocrats in paper-based policing to detect

welfare fraud (152-53)—effectively suggesting new barriers to the same social system that his family has been relying on for necessities and medical care. Mother and father speak as bearers of very different experiences, which cause them to see the world differently.

However, admitting this subjectivity does not inspire Sekula to embrace expressive artistic means, much less a moral relativism. Writing in a flat style, unmarked by sentence case or punctuation, he claims his goals are actually anti-expressive: “i am not trying to discover myself [...] this material is interesting only insofar as it is *social* material [...]” he insists (Sekula 2003b, 161; emphasis original). Despite the autobiographical subject matter, Sekula reveals himself to be less interested in his family as individuals than as social actors. Like research subjects, they are never named.⁶⁷ Sekula gives them generic identities to replace their intimate familial ones: his father is referred to as “the engineer” and his mother, “the engineer’s wife.” They function as social locations, just like the social pairs in the passage cited above (boss and worker, teacher and student, pizza cook or sociologist,⁶⁸ man and woman). An uncanny, impersonal distance pervades the piece, as Sekula temporarily exempts himself from his role as son to play the role of sociologist-with-a-camera.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong I think to see *Aerospace Folktales* as a demonstration of how objective conditions “produce” subject-positions in the sociological sense. It is obvious that we are all embedded in particular social and historical situations that shape our tastes and life-chances. *Aerospace Folktales* does not try to convince us that objectivity is the “source” of subjectivity but rather that both share the same source: social division and the competing values and interests that come with it.

This is emphasized most clearly in the long passage cited above, where Sekula explains that he cannot offer the audience a “pure” art experience, appealing to social divisions and social perspectives. Listed in a regular, sea-saw rhythm, the social pairs suggest not just subjective, individual differences of taste but a whole structured, unequal series of exclusions that shape one’s life chances as much as they shape one’s taste. In other words, by being structured, these

⁶⁷ Their names are struck from identifying documents. Sekula names his father in unpublished notebooks (Sekula papers).

⁶⁸ The odd pairing of pizza cook and sociologist refers to Sekula, who is posing as a social scientist rather than as an “artist” driven to self-expression. He likely worked in a kitchen at the time (the following year, 1974, he photographed the restaurant where he worked along with its staff and menu items, one of which was pizza).

perspectives exist in relation, and are therefore also *objective*. But this sense of “objectivity” does not imply that they are views from nowhere, neutral, from “the outside.” Quite the opposite. If there were no social structures, no *dispositifs* or *habitus*, there would be no subject locations, no subjects and also, therefore, no differences of perspective at all. So, as counterintuitive as this may seem, the views and experiences of Sekula’s parents are objective, not despite their lack of “neutrality,” but because of it. It is the task of *Aerospace Folktales* as a whole to construct objectivity and subjectivity as an interdependent binary pair, just as they appear in the list of social pairs above, not to explain how individual behavior is socially “caused.” However much one term attempts to smother its binary other to conceal this interdependency, they always travel together.

Of course binaries themselves do not exhaust the construction of identities, and Ignace’s identity as a “white-collar” technocrat is explored through a constellation of parts that layer media and perspectives on top of each other to achieve multi-dimensional complexity. In the photograph of Ignace’s resumé, we learn that he served in the US Army Air Corps during World War II and worked as a chemist with the US Air Force during the ‘50s. Sekula’s written commentary provides an additional angle, revealing that his father had hoped to be a pilot when he was a kid and so encouraged his own children to build model planes, which appear in photographs of the children’s bedroom, hanging from the ceiling like protective or threatening mobiles (Sekula 2003b, 124-25).

The aerospace motif appears again, differently, in a *mise-en-abyme*, a photograph of family photographs, arranged on the wall as steps in a V-shaped line, mimicking a V-formation or air force “wings.” A portrait of Sekula’s father is positioned at the tip, as patriarch. One of his sisters poses, unsmiling, in front of this idiosyncratic hanging. Her presence in this photograph, like the fighter plane models suspended in the children’s bedroom, connects the aerospace industry to the children of its workers. Thus, the aerospace industry forms a line of continuity across multiple images and texts, connecting the father’s childhood aspirations, through his professional life, finally penetrating into his domestic activities. The aerospace industry is present even in aesthetic choices made while decorating his home and values transmitted to his children.

This sequence has accomplished something remarkable: it has moved us in two directions at once. First, we have taken a linear voyage from the public self-presentation of the resumé to

the privacy of the domestic space in the way I just summarized. At the same time, the sequence has followed a biological cycle of generations, from Ignace's childhood to his own children. In other words, the sequence traces two axes: the axis of labor, where the subject is positioned as an actor in an economic system, which we might instinctively call broadly "objective" and the contrasting "subjective" axis of parenting, where the subject is considered in the private or domestic sphere. It would be hard to pin-point a specific place in *Aerospace Folktales* where they cross, because that crossing is dispersed across the activities of applying for a job, decorating, photographing, and raising children.

Sekula's father eventually emerges through this jagged reading experience as a contradictory and incomplete bundle of beliefs and desires from within his limited social perspective. The résumé, which Sekula also calls an "image," was chosen deliberately as a kind of representation that encapsulates the point made by the list of social pairs and the meditation on Ignace's public and private identities. It makes no sense to characterize a résumé as "objective" but it is not, therefore, "subjective." Why not? The résumé, says Sekula, is a representation of his father's entire professional experience condensed into a single letter-sized page—a form of "personal abstraction" in which a complex human being is broken down into parts and flattened, to fit into a standardized rubric suited to human resources departments.

Sekula describes it as his father's "potential value as a commodity" (Sekula 2003b, 159) alluding to Karl Marx's theory of the wage-labor system. In this model, workers sell their labor-power as a commodity to produce more commodities, which will be sold for less than the real value added by his work. The difference is surplus value, or profit, which accrues to the owners of the means of production (Marx 1976). Accordingly, management sees Sekula's father as nothing *but* his labor, and his résumé is both a concrete, practical consequence and symbolic image of that objectified status. This is the social condition of exploitation that makes an object of a subject, suppressing individuality and difference. While Sekula feels this résumé is a reassuringly formulaic object that sustains his father's mental health, an earlier picture of Ignace alone, at a desk "writing letters" with a lamp that fights the surrounding darkness, suggests the loneliness and uncertainty of looking for employment, as well as the single-mindedness necessary to go on doing it despite regular failure.

In these two pictures, we see both the image that capitalism has of Sekula's father (the résumé) and his father as a compliant producer of that image (writing alone at his desk). But

because there is still a contradiction between the producer and the product, or, how we see him and how a potential employer sees him, we are also encouraged to imagine him producing himself differently. Within the structure of the piece, alternatives surround him: in his wife's interview, for example, or in the story of a friend of Sekula's who lost his job as a forklift driver and recognized instantly that his interests diverged from the management's. At the end of appeals to psychology and ideology, Sekula cannot fully fathom his father's loyalty to Lockheed, his apparent lack of historical or class consciousness, or his "speeches" on free enterprise.

Embracing this open-endedness, *Aerospace Folktales* destroys the conventional view that objectivity and subjectivity are two opposed poles, but it stops short of a fully Lukásian reconciliation of subject and object in historical totality, precisely in order to preserve the dialectical reversal between them. Whereas normally we think of "subjectivity" as inadequate to, or falling short of "objectivity"—which is broader, purer, more stable—the terms suddenly appear reversed, so that now it is "objectivity" that is not adequate to individual perspectives. The concept of objectivity as a neutral "view from nowhere" cannot capture their structuredness. *Aerospace Folktales* demonstrates that social structures are complex but not random; they exhibit certain exploitations and dependencies, including conditions and privileges of membership to particular institutions.

4.2 A VERY SHORT PHILOSOPHICAL SECTION: WHAT IS A CONSTELLATION?

I have been arguing that *Aerospace Folktales* performs a kind of dialectical alchemy, whereby subjectivity is revealed as objectively dependent and then objectified, through a series of reorientations, overlaps and contradictions between unlike objects, in this case, image and text. I nominate *Aerospace Folktales* as the first "constellative" work in Sekula's oeuvre, since the diversity of materials and the sophistication of storytelling achieved through them goes beyond anything he had made up to that point. Adorno, who elaborated the concept of constellative writing, believed that that dialectical transformation was its ultimate aim. In his view constellations were a contact point between theory and practice, making them hospitable to

materialist philosophy. Over the years, Adorno hung onto the idea of the constellation, which had already appeared, fully developed, in his inaugural lecture at the University of Frankfurt, “The Actuality of Philosophy” (1931). In the first 3 or 4 pages of this talk, the young professor explained that his approach was a form of philosophical interpretation—but of a unique, practical kind, distinguishing his approach from other dominant philosophies, most pointedly, Heidegger’s, while aligning it with Walter Benjamin’s (Adorno 1977a). As is well-documented, Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* study (1927) was the source of the concept of the constellation and provided the kernel of many ideas that appear in Adorno’s later work.⁶⁹

Philosophical problems, Adorno thought, were like “riddles.” But there was a problem with the conventional practice of philosophical interpretation, which tasked itself with accessing the “meanings” that supposedly stand behind them. The problem was that every “solution” left its riddle intact, more or less as it was, ready for the next interpreter. Rather than “solving” the riddle, the proper task of a dialectical, material philosophical interpretation was the dissolution of the riddle itself, by reconfiguring its parts. For this reason, Adorno believed, dialectical philosophy was not like other philosophy, which aimed at better, more accurate solutions to old questions, but instead would annihilate the question through its answer, changing not only our consciousness of the world but, in some sense, the reality of the world with it. This would not proceed, as Hegel believed, on the side of ideas, but through a “demand” or, perhaps, a “desire” for social and institutional change. Adorno’s approach is Lukácsian in its accommodation of the fragment and totality, but unlike Lukács’ model, the constellation does not aim at reconciliation, but holds on to contradiction and heterogeneity. Above all, it transforms its problem, rather than fitting into it; it takes its place rather than hovering “behind” it as its hidden truth. In Adorno’s own words:

philosophy has to bring its elements, which it receives from the sciences, into changing constellations, or, to say it with less astrologically and scientifically more current expression, into changing configurations, until they fall into a figure, which can be read as an answer, while at the same time the question disappears. (Adorno 1977a, 34)

Easier said than done, especially since Adorno, allergic to every abstracting tendency,

⁶⁹ For documentation, see Foster (2007, 82), Hammer (2006, 39-40), Bernstein (2001), Jarvis (1998, 175-78), Jay (1984), and especially Buck-Morss (1979, 90), for a detailed account.

refused to provide general guidelines in this direction. *Negative Dialectics* is the closest he ever got, which itself is a notoriously anti-systematic and scarcely methodological text. But in this he is, at minimum, consistent: if constellative writing could be summarized and generalized, it would be like other kinds of philosophy, understanding and explaining rather than transforming its objects. However, there are a number of fascinating metaphors he uses in this text and elsewhere, offering hints of what dialectical philosophy should be like. The most famous is the one borrowed from Benjamin already noted: a “flash of lightning” that both illuminates and consumes its object in the same moment (Adorno 1977a, 31). Elsewhere Adorno speaks of a key or combination to a safe (2008, 139; 1995, 163; 1977a, 35). In this metaphor, the particular combination of teeth or numbers reconfigures the interior mechanical parts so that the door can be unlocked. Of course, such keys must be made to order: they cannot be too large (like idealism’s general categories) or too small (like sociology’s sub-classes).

Years later, Adorno struggled to find another image to help his students at the University of Frankfurt understand his experience of his own intellectual activity: rigorous but not rigid, intuitive without being random. Benjamin’s “flash of lighting” had stayed with him, but thirty-five years on he had to admit that this kind of epiphany is actually quite rare. More common, he said, is not an experience of fire, but of water, which would likely have intrigued Sekula. The constellation is like “rivers or streams that flow underground for long distances and then suddenly come to the surface and are there, but owe the illusion of suddenness to the fact that we do not know where they have been, or, to put in a more educated way, the so-called intuitions are crystallizations of an unconscious knowledge” (Adorno 2008, 94).

Much more could be said about the various and not entirely consistent uses to which this term is put,⁷⁰ suffice to say here that the ultimate model for this kind of thinking is the work of art (or musical composition) (Adorno 1995, 165).⁷¹ Sekula, with his interest in tracing “patterns of meaning” from micro-level experiences to historical situations (Sekula 2003a, 25), seems exemplary in this regard, not only because of the way he places a heterogeneity of materials into

⁷⁰ Helmling has done work in this direction, noting the various uses of “constellation,” “ensemble,” and “force field” (Kraftfeld) (Helmling 2003).

⁷¹ “Artworks say what is more than the existing, and they do this exclusively by making a constellation of how it is, ‘Comment c’est.’” Similarly, “[t]he nonexistent in artworks is a constellation of the existing” (Adorno 1997a, 133, 135).

complex relation, but because of his materialist commitments to social analysis and transformation.

4.3 THE DIPTYCH AS PROTO-CONSTELLATION

So far I have made it seem like a constellation is an extremely complex thing. Complexity is native to heterogeneity and difference, which are crucial to it, but dialectical transformation depends less on large quantities of materials and more on what they are and how they are organized. Dialectical movements can occur in the juxtaposition of few or even just two objects, a practice of which Sekula has become a master. Although his many interpreters have noted the rigor of the sequential approach, none has explored his use of the diptych.

Joining pictures in diptychs and polyptychs was first developed in *Aerospace Folktales*, although the technique of doubling had already been present in Sekula's earlier multi-media installation *Gallery Voice Montage* (1970).⁷² Prominent among the variety of polyptychs in Sekula's oeuvre is a type composed of two or more consecutive frames taken on the same roll of film (Blanc 2009). Between the two frames is an interval of time, which registers variation, like two frames on a film strip with several seconds cut away between them. The suggestion of motion and continuity is strong, but escapes any straightforward narrative resolution (there is nothing as compact like "before and after" in his work). *Aerospace Folktales* includes a set of four pictures of this kind, all taken from the same location in the Sekula home just by the front door and probably within seconds of each other. In the first picture, the door is open and the frame is empty of people. Then, in the three subsequent frames, Sekula's sister, his mother and finally his father enter through the door one at a time, their figures motion-blurred by the slow shutter speed.

⁷² *Gallery Voice Montage* is composed of two identical square blank canvases (they are stretched but unprimed and otherwise unmarked, 120 x 120 cm each) and an audio track played on speakers mounted on their backs (the same audio plays from both). The "montage" is achieved by layering object, audio track and image surface—although the image is notably absent.

Fish Story opens with a diptych of this type (photographs #1-2).⁷³ Both depict the same coin-operated binocular viewer, at different angles and at different moments. In both pictures, the low, hot sun makes the scene shimmer, as if everything were lightly dusted in gold. In the first picture, the binocular viewer is oriented with its “face” to us and we are close enough to feel invited into the picture, as if we could just reach in and operate the apparatus ourselves. The viewer is mounted on a pivot stand at the window. Beyond it, through the window, is a boat out on the water, lightly obscured by the grime and flecks of moisture that adhere to the glass. To the right, barely visible in the partial shadows of the mid-ground, is some kind of cleaning equipment, perhaps a flip-lock dustpan, leaning against the wall at rest. Together, these three objects—binocular viewer, ship, cleaning equipment—form a single, breathtakingly compact announcement of the themes of the project as a whole: visibility, maritime worlds, and labor.

We never get a chance to see the view through the viewer. Instead, in the second picture of the pair, the camera has pulled us back, relinquishing our place to a full-length figure who grasps the viewer, looking over his left shoulder. The caption identifies him as a “boy looking at his mother” on the Staten Island Ferry in New York harbor, in February of 1990. Between the first image and the second, the emphasis shifts, like variation in a musical theme. The central object of attention in the first photograph, the binocular viewer, recedes in the second, becoming a part of the setting, while the boy emerges as the main photographic subject. His presence immediately complicates the clarity of the themes as they appeared in the first picture, inflecting them with their opposites, so they take on the character of dialectical problems. Holding the binocular viewer, while looking over his shoulder, the photograph responds to the theme of visibility with ideas about touch, to space with enclosure and to labor with leisure. The theme of seeing and sight, abstractly present in the first image of the binocular apparatus, now appears concrete, directional and embodied, both in the motif of the human figure (does he see his mother? Does she look back?) and in the body of the photograph, which now manifests duality in the form or “body” of the diptych itself.

There is a third embodiment that takes place in the course of viewing, and that is in the body of the audience itself. I have said that boy comes to take “our” place in the second image,

⁷³ In the print version of *Fish Story*, these are arranged as a pair of images on facing pages. They are framed together in the exhibition version.

orienting the face of the binocular viewer towards himself, just as it was oriented towards the camera's face, "our" face, a moment ago. Suddenly, we realize that for us to have occupied the place we just did, where the boy is now, we must have been embodied too, just as he is. Thrown back upon the first image for a second time with a new consciousness of our own embodiment, we can now consider the mechanics of viewing *this* object from *this* perspective and speculate about who "we" might be. At this moment, when we recognize the first photograph as having *a* perspective, as being *oriented* towards our bodies, so that the symbolic abstraction of the iconography encounters the particularity of *this* viewing subject as an open question. (Am I the bearer of a sexed, classed, raced gaze? Am I a worker? Am I leisured? Is the distance beyond the window traversable or inaccessible?) This self-consciousness is carried back to the second image once again and to its source, the boy, who we notice is looking away. We also realize, finally, that the directionality of his gaze is exclusively his. We do not see what he sees or how he sees. Identification collapses and difference finally asserts itself.

Building on my earlier allusion to the temporality of filmstrip, I want to claim that Sekula's ambition for the sequence is to introduce movement between the level of the concept and social experience and between identity and non-identity, which is made possible by the *temporal* dimension of discovery and transformation achieved when each side is presented sequentially in its own frame. The dialectic of labor and leisure is articulated in this diptych as two distinct moments each with its own present and not a claim about the identification of this moment with a total historical process. Concepts, if we read Sekula this way, are not simple but complex, with two or more sides that can be revealed by putting things into relation. At minimum, every concept has a non-conceptual moment that can be recovered in the constellation. The diptych is an effort in this direction.

These two photographs are the first in *Fish Story*, but they do not, strictly speaking constitute its beginning. In its print version, *Fish Story* opens slowly, with a title page, followed by an illustration from Diderot's *Encyclopédie* showing a net-weaving technique, followed by front matter, and then a fragment from Aristotle's *De Interpretatione* set in italics, in white script against a full-bleed black background: "A sea-fight must either take place tomorrow or not, but it is not necessary that it should take place tomorrow, nor is it necessary that it should not take place" (Sekula 2002b, 9). (When exhibited, this quote was included as a text panel.) When asked about the significance of this passage in an interview, Sekula explained that it suggested

something of the unpredictability of the current situation, which began, as did *Fish Story* itself, in 1989 with a global geopolitical change (Sekula 1995, 6).

But this passage also suggests a deeper connection to the problem of realism as I have framed it, which has been central to Sekula's ideas about materialism and his goals with *Fish Story*. Sekula had copied it down in his notebook three years earlier, while traveling in Europe, in an entry on September 17, 1992, under the heading "A note on critical realism." The quote itself is lifted not from *De Interpretatione* directly, but from *Uncritical Theory: Postmodernism, Intellectuals and the Gulf War* by Christopher Norris, which was published that same year (Norris 1992). Norris' book is an energetic attack on postmodernism, particularly on what he perceived to be the corrosive intellectual fashion initiated by Baudrillard and spread by his followers, to view political events as hyperreal media effects in the absence of any "ground" or yardstick against which to measure their truth. Norris was particularly appalled by the indifference of his academic colleagues to the violence and death that accompanied the Gulf War, and even more outraged when Baudrillard—who had predicted that a Gulf war would never take place—refused to retract his thesis in light of its actual happening. In chapter 2 of his book, Norris cites J. Fisher Solomon, who in turn cites the passage from *De Interpretatione* while developing an argument from Aristotle's probabilistic inferential reasoning against postmodern skepticism, an argument that Norris characterizes as "critical realism."

There are no further records of Sekula's particular reaction to Norris' book; doubtless he was broadly sympathetic to its aims and particularly intrigued by Aristotle's naval example. During the long period when he was making *Fish Story*, Sekula stuffed a filing cabinet with sundry materials on the economic, cultural and technical histories of maritime worlds, many of which were fed into the long "Dismal Science" essays in *Fish Story*. Sekula may also have been impressed with another aspect of the context in which Aristotle's quote appeared, where Norris responds to Solomon's *Discourse and Reference in the Nuclear Age* (1988). Nuclear power was an important theme in *Aerospace Folktales*. Several photographs show a book entitled *The Effects of Nuclear Weapons*—its front cover and several open pages—which fulfill the promise of the title in graphs, diagrams, text and photographs. One photograph shows a shelf of works of great literature that Sekula's father purchased through subscription (Grimm's *Fair Tales*, *The Prisoner of Lenda*, *Lord Jim*, *Gulliver's Travels* and *Billy Budd* among others. The Sekula children were paid one dollar for every book they read—an early education in economic

incentives). In the following photograph *The Effects of Nuclear Weapons* has inserted itself between us and that row of canonical titles with its cover clearly legible. The appearance of a scientific book on war in the presence of the literary canon may be a sly joke about the dialectic of enlightenment or an argument for a shift of priorities among artists in the wake of the Vietnam War.

These were not abstract questions. Sekula's own concern with war developed in the 1970s. The Vietnam War had radicalized student politics in California, and for Sekula, the war was unusually close. His university, UCSD, was near a marine base and Sekula later recalled how students hid deserters in the dorms (Sekula 2002b, 187). Several of his early "guerilla" installation and performance pieces were explicitly political reactions to the war. One of these, *Sculpture Commemorating the 102nd Anniversary of the University of California* (1970) used barbed wire scavenged from an abandoned firing range near the campus (Sekula 2003a, 16). Although Sekula's work has remained explicitly political, these early works stand out for being confrontational in their political engagement with the audience.

From Aristototele to Vietnam, war is eternally present—subtly present, too, in the picture of the boy with the bomber jacket on the Staten Island Ferry. This is a depressing thought, but it is not exclusive or absolute. Sekula has emphasized that the importance of the negative space between frames, both as a way of distinguishing his work from the dominance of the unified and single tableau so prominent in contemporary photo-based art, but also, for its temporal effect. "The gaps, or intervals between pictures are continually driving the sequence forward" he said, adding, "every move forward requires a new move backward, which is one of the ways sequences on the wall differ from films or slide shows" (Sekula and Foster 1995, 24). This is true but not obvious (after all, who would ever think to watch a film or slideshow backwards?). We have seen how each half of the diptych changes with the experience of the other, or in other words, how change requires the separation between them, but the gaps between pictures also create spaces in the narrative for alternatives and possibilities.

And holding out for new possibilities is exactly the point, I take it, of opening *Fish Story* with the quote from Aristotle. The famous "sea-battle" example from *De Interpretatione* IX is given in an argument about modalities, in which Aristotle considers the problem of determinism. (If there can be true statements about undecided events in the future, like a sea-battle, then the future event must be determined in advance.) There is a debate about how to understand

Aristotle's solution to this paradox and further debate about what Chapter IX is even about. Suffice for my purposes here to say that this quote takes the verbal form of a "diptych" of bivalent non-necessity (neither p nor not- p is necessary), which could be read as a critique of determinism, to be applied to the photographs.

Lest we should read the passage as purely a problem for formal logic, the following right-hand page supplies ethical substance to the argument: the boy in the imitation military jacket. This image picks up the link between children and war already explored in *Aerospace Folktales*. But as much as the next generation is growing up within a matrix of economic and historical pressures (playing *Black Ops* or becoming child soldiers), Sekula does not portray children as victims of their own futures. This open possibility expressed by the text is reinforced in the image of the boy as much as in the gaps between the pictures. There is something exploratory and energetic in the boy's posture, as he turns to look over his shoulder that suggests uncertainty and desiring. Maybe he wants a quarter to activate the binocular viewer, or maybe, reading his pose allegorically, he wants a different view altogether.

How should the relationship between these two pictures be characterized? The relationship is one of similarity which is not doubling, but which is also not just a "variation," that is, another image of a different object treated with the same formal procedure. This kind of difference is Sekula's solution to resisting the conventional art-photographer's practice of photographing in "series." In series, pictures cover one subject with one format, so the order has no particular integrity. This is not because there are no differences between the pictures, but because the differences between them are all *of the same kind*, a paradoxical "metronomic regularity" (Sekula 1999, 249) *of* diversity, or, the sameness of difference. This means that although one order of pictures may be more pleasing than another for the formal variety it offers, the meaning is not integral because it is not grounded in the singularity of the kinds of relationships established by that order. (Making objects in series is not exclusive to photography; Gerhard Richter's "color chart" paintings, begun in 1966, are a perfect example of an eminently serial format.) Instead, and in an attempt to sharply distinguish his approach from the series, Sekula referred to his suites of pictures as "sequences." What makes the sequence unique is that its meaning is derived from the relationships between the parts, so the parts cannot be extracted from the whole.

It is difficult to find precise language to describe *Fish Story*, a complex multi-year project

that Sekula completed from roughly 1989-1995. It has an existence as both exhibition and book. Structurally, the book is divided into seven chapters, consisting in a sequence of photographs made by the artist, punctuated by short texts and concluding with an image list of descriptive captions. Altogether it is made up of 105 photographs (exhibited as 92 frames) and 26 text panels. I have analyzed only two photographs and one short text panel, or less than 2% of the total material (not including the two slide shows, which were not reproduced in the *Fish Story* publication). A monographic publication might do a better job, and a book-length treatment would probably be best. But either way, the strategies for art-historical writing seem absurdly limited: a general treatment of the work feels superficial, given the level of detail endowed to every picture by the photographic medium, while attending to individual images (as I have done) feels incomplete. Whether deliberately or not, Sekula's sequential art powerfully resists absorption into the art-critical machine, or what he calls "archival" modes of photographic organization, such as bureaucratic or curatorial systems (Sekula 1997, 57). He also effectively killed any chance at substantial commercial success. There are few institutional or private collections that can afford to buy, store or exhibit 105 photographs as a single work, and Sekula, in a posture of artistic integrity so intense it momentarily revived the spectre of an older avant-gardism, refuses to compromise by dividing up his project into "salable individual units."⁷⁴ (He authorized very few single images for limited edition prints.) "My work is based on assembling a large quantity of images and in itself defies strong ideas in the photographic world about the quantity of pictures that can make up a work" he said, in a 1995 interview. And, "while I've shown segments of this work in the U.S., at this point there is no institution interested in the larger exhibition. That in itself suggests the unassimilable quality of the work" (Sekula 1995, 6-7). This formal point reinforces Buchloh's argument that Sekula's critical account of labor makes his photographs illegible in an art world that responds only to commercial needs. Halfway through the *Fish Story* project, if not earlier, Sekula had foreseen this fate, but persisted

⁷⁴ To date, only the Museum of Modern Art has acquired *Fish Story* au complet (Gopnik 2013). It was included in the museum's exhibition *XL: 19 Recent Acquisitions in Photography* (May 10, 2013–January 6, 2014) but in abridged form.

anyway.⁷⁵

For Adorno, the passage from subject to object is dialectically valid only insofar as it “provides an image of resolutions to which materialist praxis alone has access” (1977a, 129). Indifferent to commercial and academic needs, the sequence achieves a practical resistance, just as the constellation demands. The generosity shown by the first two pictures to an individual viewer patient enough to shuttle back and forth between them, is equally refused to art institutions built on models of singularity, spectacularity and collectability. In this negative way, the sequence becomes practical. In the mean time, the book version of *Fish Story* has become a collector’s item, running between \$250 and \$400 US per (used) copy.

4.4 THE SHIPPING CONTAINER: A FIGURE FOR THE DIALECTIC OF MATERIALITY AND VIRTUALITY

One of the three themes announced in the first image of *Fish Story* is maritime space. Unlike outer space or aerospace, maritime space is emphatically material, defined as it is primarily through the distribution of massive bodies of water. After turning the page with the boy and the binocular viewer, the reader of the *Fish Story* publication will encounter this passage, whose theme will by now be familiar:

Growing up in a harbor predisposes one to retain quaint ideas about matter and thought. ...This crude materialism is underwritten by disaster. Ships explode, leak, sink, collide. Accidents happen everyday. Gravity is recognized as a force. By contrast, airline companies encourage the omnipotence of thought. This is the reason why the commissioner of airports for the city of Los Angeles is paid much more than the commissioner of harbors. The airport commissioner has to think very hard, day and night to keep all the planes in the air. (Sekula 2002b, 12)

By contrasting the two commissioners, Sekula criticizes the valorization of virtuality by

⁷⁵ Elisabeth Sussman attributes this view to the artist in her introduction for the 1993 Whitney Biennial catalogue. Her comments are based on an interview with Sekula in Los Angeles in January, 1992 (Sussman 1993, 24).

tracing its origins back to the division of manual and intellectual labor. His sarcasm (“the airport commissioner has to think very hard”) calls out the ideology of this division and the hierarchical shape it settles into. From higher up on the ladder of valued occupations, white-collar, educated workers dismiss and degrade the manual workers on whom they nevertheless depend. Sekula’s consistent attention to the spaces and gestures of manual labor works directly against this classed and classist tendency.

His thinking about this division was influenced by the Marxist philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel, author of *Intellectual and Manual Labor*, which Sekula read, probably when it appeared in English in 1978.⁷⁶ Incidentally, Sekula was not the only one influenced by Sohn-Rethel: Adorno was too. While Sohn-Rethel completed the manuscript for *Intellectual and Manual Labor* he corresponded with Adorno and Benjamin, while both were in exile (Lee 2005, 51). Their correspondence was stimulated by a shared interest in finding a way beyond old divisions between idealism and materialism. Sohn-Rethel also fed Adorno Marxist ideas, which he repurposed in brilliant ways by filtering them through psychoanalytic and social models. Lisa Yun Lee credits Sohn-Rethel for turning Adorno on to the idea that commodification shapes philosophy, which entailed accepting that philosophy was not exempted from the logic of capitalism and was in no position to offer a good “solution” to its problems from the outside. It also led Adorno to reject the notion that philosophy could ever grasp the “totality of the real” and this is the substance of the problem that he addresses in “The Actuality of Philosophy” for which the model of constellative writing served as a solution.

Sohn-Rethel was particularly interested in the way commodification emerged through exchange, becoming what he called “real abstractions.” Today, it has become commonplace to think about commodities in their affective, “virtual” dimension alone. Rather than buying commodities that we then experience, we have lately passed into a new stage of “experience consumption.” As Žižek argues, we now consume, not by acquiring new objects but just by experiencing consumption itself. “At the end of the road is thus the solipsistic fact of subjective experience,” he writes, “since the subjective experience of individual consumption is the ultimate goal of the entire production, it is logical to by-pass the object and to commodify and sell

⁷⁶ Sohn-Rethel was cited in Sekula’s photo-text work “School is a Factory,” which was originally published in *Social Work* in 1979 (Sekula 1984, 197-234).

directly this experience” (Žižek 2002, 9-10). This is all correct, but Sohn-Rethel would remind us that these remain *real* abstractions with magnitude and substance, derived from value created by a period of human labor (1978, 77). Despite the multi-billion advertising budgets, despite complex financial instruments that leverage enterprises into unheard of stratospheres of wealth, product still moves. Clicks must be converted into sales. Return on investment must be measured and improved. Investment funds and derivatives still rely on markets, which move according to sales and futures of commodities, like oil and gold, or real estate. Wal-Mart, now top of the Fortune 500, has achieved dominance by mastering the complex art of logistics and supply chain management (SCM), a relatively new field of business studies. Complex supply chains have allowed companies to source higher-quality products from a greater number of producers from all over the world, while reducing their inventory and responding faster to consumer demand. Consequently, they can also deliver better products, faster, and at a lower cost. Of course, the computer has been critical to this process, but it would not have been economically feasible except for the development of a very primitive object: the container. If the problem of representing global capitalism is a “riddle” of the Adornian kind, then the container represents its “figure”—the lighting flash to illuminate and destroy it. Set into a constellation, this simple steel box reveals the material side of the knowledge economy, not just by showing how an informational “superstructure” depends on a material “base,” but how the internal development of information technology itself proceeded by way of the same dialectic of standardization and expansion enabled by the box. With expansion came complexity, as systems multiplied and networked. By beginning with the box, virtual spaces are shown to be dependent on an information infrastructure, whose design has consequences for the health of the environment and human populations. When containerization and information systems now appear mutually dependent on the same logic of standardization and expansion, the abstract problem we began with (how can any representation be adequate to the vast global flows of capital?) is dissolved and replaced with a new, concrete one: how can we realize the utopian promise of globalization, to flatten hierarchies, free information and allow individuals to form communities according to their particular desires and interests, rather than according to geographic boundaries?

Although *Fish Story* formally began in 1989, its origins can be traced even earlier, to an encounter with the container. In 1980, Sekula was teaching at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design. On a freezing day in winter, he took a walk with the artist Karl Beveridge around a

container terminal in Halifax, making photographs that would later count as the first “sketches” for a larger work. Three years earlier he had read *Discipline and Punish*, in which Foucault discussed cargo pilferage as an early target of eighteenth-century disciplinary techniques. In a way, Sekula thought, containerization was the culmination of those efforts, since it had effectively reduced or eliminated theft. The introduction of containers also killed waterfront culture, simultaneously opening up older ports to expensive redevelopment, including San Pedro, where Sekula had grown up. Predictably, he filtered this historical and personal mix through Harry Braverman’s *Labor and Monopoly Capital*, and in his unique synthetic way, began to evolve a project around the phenomenon of containerization. “This was something with global consequence that no one had really explored,” he felt (Sekula 2003a, 25).

The container was not invented but evolved, as one ambitious American entrepreneur drove companies, government agencies, policy makers and industrial engineers towards a tipping point of efficiency. This history is recounted in a wonderful book by Marc Levinson, who argues that although containerization did not “cause” globalization in any straightforward sense, it contributed much more than it is normally given credit for (none, actually, until the publication of Levinson’s book) (Levinson 2005). Although the history of shipping seems strictly economic and therefore unrelated to the artistic issues central to this chapter, I must beg my reader’s patience. As Sekula has himself indicated, he hopes to make work that “spirals out into the world” not into the history of art, and by retracing those spirals from art to economic structure we will get a clearer picture of how the constellation is not merely a metaphor for a formal or thematic structure, but rather is like a field where those activities we perceive to be differentiated (for example, intellectual and manual labor, or autonomous “art” and “social” history) are revealed to partake in each others’ processes and so are conceptually unsettled, with practical consequences.

The story begins with Malcolm McLean, a trucking executive with an obsessive attention to the bottom line and remarkable ability to maneuver his finances in creative ways while still remaining within the bounds of the law. Through his many cost-saving experiments, he strove to shave a few dollars off moving freight along the eastern coast of the US through standardization and automation. It was only later, with the gradual evolution of integrations between land freight and shipping (intermodal freight), as well as the establishment of standard container sizes and weights, plus the loosening of government control and subsidies, that McLean’s intuition that he

was in the business of freight, not ships or trains per se, began transforming the world.

Traditionally, freight was shipped “breakbulk.” Individual items, in boxes, barrels, pallets, etc. were stored in a ship in whatever manner was most space-efficient—without off-balancing the boat which could be dangerous on rough water. This was labor-intensive and costly. It required skilled workers who knew how to pack items in this way, who could unpack and repack objects as a ship made calls at several ports. It was also slow. While being loaded and unloaded, cargo was held up. Containerization, by contrast, and the mega-ships and super-ports that it eventually produced, dropped costs so low that materials could be sourced from every part of the world, assembled where labor was the cheapest, and shipped to buyers with savings much deeper than the cost of freight.

As Levinson recounts in *The Box*, it was immediately obvious that standardizing the box sizes and automating loading and unloading would create massive job losses for dockworkers, but it was not immediately obvious that it would also decimate domestic manufacturing. In the breakbulk days, the costs of shipping forced factories to locate close to their customers. But with containerization, factories could suddenly be anywhere. As Levinson writes, “even with customs duties and time delays, factories in Malaysia could deliver blouses to Macy’s in Herald Square more cheaply than could blouse manufacturers in the nearby lofts of New York’s garment district” (Levinson 2006, 3). Outsourcing was suddenly possible and as wages dropped, profits rose.

The Vietnam War also played a critical, timely role. Even up until 1967 the gains in container shipping, while profitable, were not revolutionary. It wasn’t until shipping and logistical problems emerged with the United States’ efforts to wage a complex and long war abroad, that new technical solutions were needed on a large scale. At first, supplies began arriving in Vietnam in breakbulk chaos. The ports were so limited and the congestion so severe, that it took five days to unload on average—at worst, two weeks. Sometimes deliveries were made at multiple ports, requiring unloading and reloading at each. Theft was a problem and there was no way to know what items were needed, in what quantity, and when. McLean’s company, Sea-Land, competed for an American military contract, which it won in 1966. Cam Ranh Bay was the first port converted for containership use (Levinson 2005, 180). By November 1967, the *Oakland* was carrying the equivalent of 10 breakbulk ships’ cargo to Vietnam. With the help of a state of the art punch-card computer, it could operate at half the cost of a navy vessel, not

counting the reductions in loss or damage. The efficiencies were so great that several trips were made with partially filled containers, to fulfill minimums outlined in the contract. This opportunity was critical to McLean's business, which in its peak year, recorded military contracts as 30% of its sales. On the government's side, it would have been difficult to adequately house, supply and feed 540,000 service personnel in Vietnam, while the press reports of theft, inefficiency, waste, shortages would have damaged domestic support for the war (184).

Towards the end of the 1960s, container shipping had become big business, and European and Asian shippers rushed to compete, in the industrial equivalent of an arms race. Bigger and faster vessels were constructed, at mind-boggling costs. Subsidies and consortia were necessary to manage these, and even then, the capital-intensive nature of this building caught up with the industry as the price of oil fluctuated. Containerports likewise popped up in unexpected places, while older ports died trying to keep up, and business shifted with the winds. Eventually governments, tired of seeing their investments go to waste, handed over most of the operations and their risk to private developers, who, at the end of the twentieth century, controlled about 129 ports worldwide and handled half the world's cargo.

The expansion has since been immense. When the *Oakland* set sail in 1967, it carried a capacity of 609 35-foot containers. In 1968 Sea-Land commissioned the SL-7, with 1,096 35-foot boxes, equivalent of 1,900 20-foot boxes, to sail around the world in 56 days. By the 1980s ships held the equivalent of 4 200 20-foot containers, and by 1988 they were "Panamax"—just wide to fit through the Panama canal (Levinson 2006, 235). Levinson's research indicates that today, the equivalent of 300 million 20-foot containers cross the oceans each year (277). Naval architects struggle against the width of the Straits of Malacca. However, post-Malaccamax vessels would require a longer, less efficient route (facts of geography assert themselves once again). Perhaps most impressively, many of these enormous ships have managed to reduce and almost eliminate workers. The multinational Maersk has recently built the biggest ship in the world, which has a capacity of 18,000 TEUs and is a quarter mile long. A single trip from Rotterdam to Shanghai costs \$2.5 million US, but astonishingly, requires a crew complement of only twenty-two (Bennett 2013, 50).

Containers feature in every chapter of *Fish Story* except one.⁷⁷ There are fourteen

⁷⁷ Chapter 5, "Message in a Bottle."

pictures of them altogether. We see them being lifted, stacked, transported, lived in, abandoned and rotting. We also see the way they transformed economies and individual lives. The first container picture (#11) is an elevated view of a crane loading forty-foot containers arriving from Asian countries in Los Angeles. The machine's vast reach is emphasized by the cantilever, which extends the entire length of the frame, spanning across endless stacks of painted metal boxes. By the contrast, the operator's cabin, mounted on the underside of the cantilever, seems tiny. The enormity of this machine and the volume it handles is further emphasized by the contrast it cuts against the picture on the opposite page (#10), a view of a beach with the ruins of an ancient Roman harbor near Minturno, on the coast between Rome and Naples. The cut stone is modest and weathered, with a low breakwater at a distance from the shore, extending between two points of land. The horizontal line of the breakwater separates us from the water beyond and seals us in on the beach. By contrast, the view of the container stacks (#11) has no horizon line (it is concealed behind the cantilever) so water and sky appear illusionistically like one infinite blue atmosphere extending in every direction without end. If anyone still had doubts as to whether we had entered a new age of global exchange, this contrast should dispel them.

Sekula has emphasized that he aims to make art that leads the audience outside the boundaries of purely aesthetic institutions and modes of engagements: "the key question for me is whether the meaning-structure of the work spirals inward toward the art-system or outward toward the world" (Sekula 2003a, 41). The diversity of materials and their loosely assembled structure demand that interpreters follow their threads out into the world. Of course photography, because of its peculiar facticity, pulls more strongly than other kinds of art in that wayward direction. But the *Sea-Land* episode reveals something about the ways that art production is already integrated into the larger systems, shaped and enabled by them. Passage had been secured for Sekula with the help of his relationship to the contemporary art organization Witte de With, and especially Chris Dercon, its director (now director of the Tate Gallery, London). Dercon had been following Sekula's work for some time, and in 1990, while Sekula was at the Rijksakademie in Amsterdam,⁷⁸ he seized the opportunity to arrange a lunch in Rotterdam.

In December 1992 Sekula wrote a proposal and budget for *Fish Story*. It outlined his

⁷⁸ The occasion for his visit was a one-month faculty exchange. His Dutch counterpart at the Rijksakademie was Anne Tilroe (Mariëtta Dirker, pers. comm.).

vision for a complex multi-media installation and expressed hopes that Dercon would finance his way to Dakar, Senegal. But it was not until the following year, when Dercon saw the first two sections of *Fish Story* as a work in progress at the Whitney Biennial that he decided to help Sekula finish this ambitious project. The Senegal trip never materialized, and Africa remains absent in the project's geography. Nevertheless, Sekula saw another opportunity to make the most of resources offered by his Rotterdam connection, which eventually produced the trip aboard *Sea-Land Quality*. In February 1993 he exchanged a number of faxes with Paul van Gennep, the deputy director at Witte de With, about the possibility of a containership voyage to Rotterdam. At the time, Witte de With's art handling and shipping company was Gerlach, a subsidiary of the large shipping company Nedlloyd.⁷⁹ Gennep naturally reached out to his Gerlach contact, Jan Kortmann (Gennep 1993).

The communications between Dercon, Gennep, Gerlach and Nedlloyd continued throughout the spring and summer. Finally, on October 15, Sekula received a fax from Tonia Van Der Berg, a Nedlloyd representative, who announced, "we have a trip for you tailormade"—on the containership *Nedlloyd Hoorn* from Rotterdam to Bremerhaven. In fact this was not the ship Sekula ended up taking, but he kept the November dates and took the earlier leg from Port Elizabeth to Rotterdam on *Sea-Land Quality* instead. As thanks for the excellent customer service, Dercon and Gennep invited Van Der Berg to "the big opening" of an upcoming exhibition at Witte de With (Van der Berg 1993).

Sekula, for his part, maintained his distance throughout this process, consciously carving out a space for his work from within the institutional opportunities provided for him by his relationship with Witte de With, and Witte de With's relationship with Nedlloyd. In July 1993, during an expensive meal in Rotterdam with Dercon, Van Der Berg, another Nedlloyd

⁷⁹ Typical of the trend towards growth through mergers, Gerlach Art Packers & Shippers was later acquired by the Finnish logistics group John Nurminen Oy (*Nordic Business Report*, August 11, 2008). Nedlloyd itself would merge with P&O Container Lines to become P&O Nedlloyd in 1996. Nedlloyd had been cooperating with Maersk Line since 1990, which acquired it in 2005. According to Maersk, at the time of acquisition, Royal P&O Nedlloyd N.V. had 13,000 employees, 156 container ships, calling at 219 ports in 99 countries. Not surprisingly, perhaps, in 1999, Maersk, which was owned by the A. P. Moller Group, took over control of Sea-Land Service Inc., Malcom McLean's old company, acquiring 70 vessels, 200,000 containers, terminals, offices and agencies, and changing its name to Maersk Sea-Land (Maersk Line website). From the perspective of the late 2000s, the 1993 shipping business looks quaint.

representative and the German art collector Jürgen Preuss, Sekula outlined his project. “Weird enthusiasms from the shipping world,” he noted privately. They discussed technical aspects of the shipping industry. Dercon contributed his thoughts on shipping art in containers. Later, Sekula wrote in his notebook: “C[hris] D[ercon] seems to be promoting a patronage relation here. I’m circumspect in describing the point-of-view of the work: stressing the spatial & imaginative consequences of technological change, but largely refraining from sneezing in the red hanky” (Sekula 1993).

Sekula later wrote to Chris Dercon when the issue of sponsorship of *Fish Story* by the Port of Rotterdam, came up, saying “I certainly don’t want the project to be construed in any way as a promotion of the port of R’dam or of any port. So in general I don’t think this is a such a good idea” (Sekula 1994). There was the desire to maintain his artistic independence at work, but also, the fact that he had not worked closely with the unions at that port and did not feel a particularly strong connection with it. During and after completing the project, Witte de With had not integrated itself institutionally with the port’s workers. By contrast, when *Fish Story* was later exhibited at the Henry Art Gallery at the University of Washington in Seattle, Sekula accepted support from both the Port of Seattle and Tacoma, and the labor unions there (Henry Art Gallery Records 1999).

The most famous and possibly, most beautiful, picture in *Fish Story* was made during the trip made on the *Sea-Land Quality*. It appears in the chapter “Middle Passage” (also featured on the cover of the *Fish Story* catalogue) (#28). It is also a picture that quietly tells the story of another kind of disaster, uncertainty and maritime spaces. *Panorama, Mid-Atlantic* shows a broad horizon of endless water, met by an expanse of dramatic mottled sky with clouds that seem to be fighting back the light and losing where two shafts of sunlight cut through in the far distance, to the right. In the middle of the composition are rows of tightly-stacked containers, creating a colorful gridded surface that seems to float above the water, extending from foreground into deep orthogonal space. The grid is subtly encircled by irregular white waves indicating churn where the boat cuts the water. There is a balance of forces between the stiff, regular boxes, all neatly stacked with maximum efficiency and the sea with its raw and dangerous power, as if man and nature had entered an equitable but unstable pact. It is a startling and beautiful picture.

We encounter this image again, in a reprise, where it is now the first image of a triptych

(#32-34) that introduces an accident, as foreshadowed in Sekula's introductory statement. As in *Aerospace Folktales*, the "telling" of this accident is loose and open-ended. Sekula combines the three photographs with fragments of text. There is no correct way to read this ensemble and there is no way of knowing how a given reader will approach it anyway. If we take the photographs first, here is what we see: the first image (#32) is a variation on the view in *Panorama*. The frame has shifted to the right, so that the colored grid now juts in from the lower-left, making room for a little sliver of white out on the water. Moving down to the second and third images, we realize that the white mark is a sailboat. Realizing this, we can return to the first image of the triptych, trying to make use of this additional information to better understand an image that had just given us trouble. Sekula photographed the sailboat just as the nose of the container ship closes in on its location, and its smallness in the distance once again emphasizes the enormity of the container ship. In the second photograph, the camera looks down over the edge of the container ship at the white boat and at the upturned face of a man its side, a walkie-talkie in hand. The final image is an even closer crop of that downward-looking angle on the white sailboat and Sekula has flipped its orientation vertically, so that the nose of the white sailboat now points in the opposite direction, downwards. This is disorienting, but also has the effect of binding the second and third frames together, since the rusty red edges of the container ship now meet, in an almost continuous line.

On the left-hand page, facing this suite of images, is a strange patchwork of texts. First, a short article from a Cherbourg newspaper, recounts (in French) the accident of the white sailboat, identifying it as the *Happy Ending* whose owner, Gerald Hardesty, was found dead in the cabin. (The deceased is never pictured.) His wife, Carole, was missing. It further reports that a crewmember of the *Sea-Land Quality* found them. Below this Sekula has copied out instructions in case of fire or emergency, abandon ship orders and nuclear, biological and chemical warfare, chiming in with the sinister theme of accidents and mortality. Finally, under the title "The Bo'sun's Story" Sekula has transcribed this quote: "Black-and-white photos tell the truth. That's why insurance companies use them" (Sekula 2002b, 62).

Flipping to the captions at the end of the chapter, we learn that all the photographs were made on Voyage 167 of the *Sea-Land Quality* from Elizabeth, New Jersey, to Rotterdam, in November 1993 (Sekula 2002b, 76). (The ship was named after Malcolm MacLean's company.) This confirms that we were indeed on the container ship that found the sailboat, that the man

with the walkie-talkie is the crew member mentioned in the article (Sekula's notebooks further reveal him to be the chief mate, who is asking the captain for instructions). The triptych showing the boat, empty, is identified by its caption as "Conclusion to the search for the disabled and drifting sailboat *Happy Ending*"—a name that is less ironic than weirdly tragic. This caption notwithstanding, the photographs do not seem to provide the security and satisfaction we might expect of a "conclusion." Every piece of this puzzle and its overall effect, feels instead like a question.

It is difficult to put together a full story from this collection of fragments. The artists' notebooks help somewhat. On November 13, after a rough night, Sekula got up to learn that the *Sea-Land Quality* had been called at about 5 am to aid in the search for a sailboat, reportedly lost off the coast of England. They searched all morning and finally saw a small boat that fit the description out on the water. A Polish ship, the *Tarnowska*, had also got the call, and the two closed in. On their second pass the crew of the *Sea-Land Quality* threw down a line and sent down the chief mate to investigate.⁸⁰ Inside the cabin, he discovered the body of a dead man. By some strange coincidence, the sailboat was from Anaheim, California—about forty minutes' drive from Sekula's home in Los Angeles (Sekula papers).

We never find out how the man died, or what happened to his wife, just as we never find learn the fate of Pancake. This accident reaffirms the sense of uncertainty and instability described in the opening words of *Fish Story*: "crude materialism is underwritten by disaster. Ships explode, leak, sink, collide. Accidents happen everyday." The motif of death and risk was foreshadowed by an earlier image of a dirty coveralls spread out on the floor like a discarded outer skin or the sprawling pose of a corpse ready for a chalk outline. The corresponding caption is ominous: "Filling lifeboat with water equivalent to weight of crew to test the movement of the boat falls before departure" it reads (Sekula 2002b, 76). These stories, told in photographs, remind us that there is a human risk and human cost involved in all these activities, whether the loss of a livelihood or of life.

⁸⁰ Sekula records that this required him scaling the side of the containership to board the boat, which he did, like everything else, "with a kind of boy scout optimism." (The chief mate is also identified as the figure in photograph #29, once again climbing a ladder, this time as a silhouette.)

Perhaps what is truly astounding about globalization, is not its complexity and extension, but that it could have been supported in its expansion by something so simple as a metal box. The container is evidence of a dialectical movement at work, tending towards simplification and complexity at the same time. In my summary of the rise of containerization I emphasized the drive to efficiency. But this is not achieved in the simplicity of the box alone. Rather it was in the standardization of the sizes and weights that made all the difference by permitting intermodal freight. Rather than opening the boxes, taking out the merchandise and repacking it into a truck, many trucks and rail cars are now built with chassis and detachable bodies to accommodate containers. This development, to be successful, also required a change in policy, from setting freight rates based on commodity shipped (where each kind of object would be calculated separately) to standard size/weight rates. Today, 20-foot and 40-foot containers are standard, and container and containership capacity is measured in TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units). Their reporting marks are also standardized by the International Standards Organization (ISO) so that their owners can be identified, and these are issued by the Bureau International des Containers et du Transport Intermodal (BIC), a centralized authority in France. This international standardization guarantees that each container code will be unique.⁸¹ Without agreement on many levels, the long, complex supply chains and outsourcing that make shipping so cheap would not have been possible. The container is therefor a tightly integrated figure for the dialectical movement towards expansion and complexity through standardization, producing the disorganized, extended and interdependent infrastructures of today.

At this point it may seem as if I have drifted rather far from my original concern, to explicate Sekula's artistic practice. But in fact, if we follow this thread just a bit farther, we will discover that these issues are not at all peripheral, but go right to its heart. I began this chapter by claiming that there is an argument in Sekula's work: that materiality is not separate from virtuality, despite claims about dematerialization in the age of information. This argument can be extracted by reading the container as a *figure* of a dialectic between materiality and information, which informs Sekula's understanding of globalization as a process and is central to his critical realism. The lesson in the history of containerization is this: that standardization does not simply homogenize disparate practices into a single system but rather permits unprecedented complexity

⁸¹ These are called BIC-codes or ISO Alpha-codes (BIC 2008).

through the proliferation of systems. This mutual push towards standardization (resulting in efficiencies) and complexity (accelerated production, thanks for said efficiencies) is important because it provides a crucial mediation between the material and the virtual: both proceed by way of this same dialectic. It should be clear from the preceding discussion how containerization accomplishes this. If we pursue this thread in the other direction, we realize that the evolution of the Internet likewise depended on establishing the “rules” by which computers can communicate and that this process was not vastly different from the evolution of intermodal freight.

In the 1960s and 70s, hardware and software developers were working independently, writing programs to run on their own computers. In 1969, while developing a basic network linking four computer research centers in the United States, Stephen D. Crocker of UCLA introduced the first “Request for Comments” (RFC), an informal memo outlining observations and questions about his initial experiments (Crocker et al. 1969). Eventually it led to the practice of peer review, whereby developers invite the Internet community to comment on and offer suggestions for improvement. Bad ideas died out. Good ideas flourished by being adopted as standards (Crocker 2009). For example, the very successful RFC 821 described the protocol for Simple Mail Transport Protocol (SMTP), now known the world over as “email” (Postel 1982).

Today, RFCs are the backbone of Internet technology. They are submitted to the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF) and other standards bodies and are vetted, taking on the status of official documents. Some of these evolve into “Standard Track Documents” which describe Internet standards in a more formal ways, including how to interpret the human language used in the standards. Subsequent generations of documents “obsolete” earlier iterations, much like bills are adopted into law to reflect changing social practices. And much like laws, they facilitate interaction, allowing us to conduct our business with greater confidence and fewer surprises. Web programming languages like HTML and CSS can be read more or less consistently by web browsers, even though the web browsers were developed separately, because they have agreed to adhere to the standards. On the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the first RFC, Crocker recalled, “everyone understood there was a practical value in choosing to do the same task in the same way” (Crocker 2009, n. p.), in other words, efficiencies. On a basic level this meant fewer hassles for early computer scientists; at the same time, without such protocols the Internet could not exist.

The immediate consequence of the expansion of communications technologies has been

rapid improvements in technology, falling prices for computers and mobile devices, and changing fashion, which together render older models obsolete, transforming them overnight from desirable commodities into electronic waste. And here is perhaps where the material impact of the information revolution is most visible. The volume of “e-waste” is growing quickly,⁸² comprised of discarded entertainment and consumer electronics, household appliances, toys, and electrical tools, often shipped from rich countries to poor ones, where it is recycled in unsafe conditions or landfilled in informal dump sites. Electronics are complex commodities with multiple toxic metals such as lead and mercury, or fire retardants harmful to humans and to the environment. One scholar argues that containerization has facilitated this change, again, by lowering economic barriers. He calculates “only 40 good Pentium III computers pay for an entire container, leaving a comfortable margin for profit even if the container is loaded with mostly unusable waste” (Schmidt 2006).

Waste and salvage economies are an inevitable part of *Fish Story*. But Sekula is by far not the only contemporary artist concerned with garbage. Vik Muniz studied the lives of landfill workers in Jardim Gramacho outside Rio de Janeiro, enlisting them to create their own portraits using recovered objects from the mountains of trash.⁸³ Kelly Wood rigorously photographed her trash over the course of five years for *The Continuous Garbage Project*. South African Photographer Pieter Hugo made a compelling portrait of life in a toxic e-waste dump in Ghana (Demos 2010), which intersects closely with Sekula’s concerns, although no such site is directly pictured in *Fish Story*. The connections, like everywhere in Sekula’s work, are oblique, mediated, but they eventually deliver a blunt message about even less visible forms of waste, often occurring closer to home. Yet again, the container plays a role.

As we have become more efficient at generating data, storage and retrieval have become new challenges, giving birth to the “data center.” Data centers house huge banks of computers that store our emails, twitter accounts, digital photos and everything else. In the early stages they took the form of conventional field construction projects, built on-site like other “brick and mortar” buildings. They have since evolved to use modular construction, built with pre-fab

⁸² A white paper estimated that “e-waste is the fastest-growing waste stream in the developed world and in many developing countries” (Brown 2013, 5).

⁸³ This process and exhibition are documented in *Waste Land* (2010), directed by Lucy Walker with João Jardim and Karen Harley.

components that are delivered intact and merely assembled on-site, reducing capital costs and construction time (Kelley and Cooley 2011). Some data centers are literally housed in containers, such as Google's 75,000 square foot Data Center A, whose exact site remains secret, but which is probably located in The Dalles, Oregon (Miller 2009). With flexibility in mind, Google also patented a design for a portable data center in a shipping container in 2003, although other companies including Sun Microsystems have already been using similar designs, and the practice of putting computers in containers has long been used by the US Military (Miller 2011).

Despite the flexibility and rapid deployment possibilities of these new data facilities, they are still structured according to particular technical requirements (cooling, security, climate-protection). Also, for practical reasons they are often built close to the energy sources that they consume so voraciously. In "Power, Pollution and the Internet" James Glanz summarizes the results of a year-long study conducted by *The New York Times*, which condemns the data center industry for its waste and inefficiency. The study found that servers idle even when they are not processing data, awaiting a surge of activity that could crash them, and many computers continue to run old programs even when these have been updated with newer versions. *The New York Times* asked industry experts to estimate the energy use of data centers, and they offered these numbers: 30 billion watts of electricity globally, roughly equivalent to the output of 30 nuclear power plants. Unfortunately there is no American federal agency empowered to keep track of energy usage (including that of the United States government itself), but many companies are in violation of state and federal environmental protection laws. The waste is astonishing and sad, but economically rational. Data center managers are not paid to be efficient, but rather, to make data accessible at all times, under any conditions.

Glanz also observed that "the information industry is sharply at odds with its image of sleek efficiency and environmental friendliness" adding that user expectations contribute to the problem, with a line that will be familiar to readers: "These physical realities of data are far from the mythology of the Internet: where lives are lived in the 'virtual' world and all manner of memory is stored in 'the cloud'" (Glanz 2012, n. p.). And, like everything else, the demand for energy is on the rise. Drawing on data from four studies, researchers estimate that "residential energy use by electronic equipment will rise to 30% of the overall global demand for power by 2022, and 45% by 2030, thanks to server farms and the increasing time people around the world spend watching screens" (Maxwell and Miller 2011, 594).

Precisely how we will meet our growing global energy needs is a major occupation for industry leaders, governments and consumers. What is not a major occupation for anyone within shouting distance of the mainstream media is how we will change our patterns of consumption so as to reduce our global energy needs. Reducing consumption, especially on a global scale, does not suggest many strong business models, which are overwhelmingly based on consumption, and increasing consumption at that. “Growth” and “development” are indispensable concepts for economic thought; a growing economy is a sign of national health, the faster the better. The concept that systems experience periods of growth and decline with a gradual return to equilibrium, observable elsewhere in natural systems, runs against the current organization of financial institutions, which hope and sometimes believe that markets can expand endlessly, or newer, more profitable markets can be found to replace old ones when they are depleted. It is not clear, however, that the ecology is prepared to cooperate with this economic arrangement. It will almost certainly resist further exploitation at a certain point, which many climate scientists believe we have already surpassed. The emergence of the information age has been accompanied by the dawning awareness of a looming global catastrophe for which it has, however, produced no obvious solution. Like all disasters, the consequences of this one will be born disproportionately by the poor, by marginalized or migrant populations, by indigenous groups, and by all those who cannot afford to flee and rebuild.

All these issues—globalization, inequality, technology and environmental destruction—are all bound together in Sekula’s work, in the compact figure of a simple metal box.

4.5 CRITICAL REALISM AND THE PROBLEM OF REPRESENTING GLOBALIZATION

In 1997 Sekula traveled to Mexico. In Ensenada, a coastal town in Baja California, he made a striking portrait of a crouching shipyard welder cutting metal for a truck chassis at Hyundai de México SA de CV, a manufacturer of containers and chassis for intermodal transportation. He included it in a *Dead Letter Office*, which was exhibited at INSITE 97 at the Centro Cultural Tijuana, located north-east of the city center. The welder holds a blowtorch but

looks directly at the viewer, with an expression that is frank or cynical or maybe just tired. The goggles pushed up on his forehead reflect the light differently in each lens (blue and white), inevitably recalling the binocular viewer in the first image of *Fish Story*. It is a variation on the environmental portraiture pioneered by August Sander, although in his commentary on this work, Sekula said that he actually had Lewis Hine in mind (Blanc 1999). In any case it is the closest he comes anywhere in his work to making an explicitly “heroic” image of a worker. Sekula was impressed by these metal workers, among the most militant in Mexico at the time, and had been working towards the authorization of a union (Blanc 1999). In the sequence of photographs that make up *Dead Letter Office*, the welder is followed by a photograph of a worker who crouches in a symmetrical posture to sign an authorization card.

Sekula clearly valued this image highly since he reprinted it several times in different formats, for exhibitions in 2007, 2008 and 2010. As an artistic strategy, the reuse and re-circulation of this image is almost the inverse of constellative heterogeneity since it involves confronting a single image with a multiplicity of contexts rather than assembling a plurality of materials into a single work, as with *Aerospace Folktales*. In this section, I examine a few of these sites, to explore how Sekula’s critical realism confronts the problem of representing globalization. There is a widespread sense that global capitalism is so vast and so complex as to exceed representation. Behind this worry is our old habit of thinking about representation in terms of its adequacy to reality. Sekula’s work, I will argue, sidesteps the problem of adequacy by referring his representations not to globalization itself (whatever that might be) but to the utopian promises it contains. Globalization is clothed in a rhetoric of horizontality, flexibility and borderlessness. These concepts are obviously false, in the sense that the benefits of international travel, for example, are enjoyed by a privileged few while the costs are born by the global working classes. But they are not merely false; rather, they are ideological, and therefore also contain a latent, utopian truth. The ability of all to move freely about the globe without limitations of no-fly lists or undesirable passports or poverty, is a plainly utopian notion. By tapping this ideology, Sekula arrives at a reality that is not fully manifest, but which has not yet been foreclosed. This dialectic, I will argue, is figured in the body and virtual travels of the Mexican welder.

In 2007 the Mexican welder travelled to two exhibition sites simultaneously. The first was the G8 protests in Germany. The G8 was set to meet from June 6-8, at the seaside resort of

Heiligendamm, about a half-hour drive northwest of Rostock. Predictably, the official pro included an arts initiative⁸⁴ whose primary exhibition venue was created on the dockland area. A dock warehouse was coopted as a “congress center,” mocked up to imitate the façade of the nearby luxurious Kempinski hotel⁸⁵ and outfitted with bunks for tired protestors. There was a program of film screenings, talks and panel discussions. Functioning somewhat like a biennial, it included 50 international artists. Not everyone agreed about the quality of the work,⁸⁶ but by all reports, it was a pluralist and liberal intervention that aimed at consensus. By being politically inclusive the organizers could avoid being politically radical (Der Spiegel 2007).

Perhaps inevitably, these plans triggered criticism and almost immediately a counter-project was in the works, under the outraged title Holy Damn It. A coalition of several European organizations, including the Europäisches Institut für Progressive Kulturpolitik (EIPCP), criticized the limp celebratory message contained in the project’s press releases. Citing police raids against anti-G8 mobilization groups and the refusal of authorities in the host state of Mecklenburg-Vorpommern to permit a rally at Heiligendamm on June 8 (EIPCP 2007),⁸⁷ they launched an ambitious counter-program to mobilize against both the G8 and the official arts program in one gesture.

Ten artists, including Allan Sekula, were invited to create protest posters. “Each poster of the ten artists and artist groups was printed 5,000 times in A2 format, 4c [sic], and distributed: The posters will be handed out for free to various groups mobilizing against the summit.” For his design, Sekula overlaid the Mexican welder’s portrait with a text, “*Alle Menschen werden Schwestern*” (“all will be sisters”) in a gendered play on Schiller’s, *Ode to Joy*. The letters appear to be cut individually out of magazines or newspapers, in the crude style of an anonymous

⁸⁴ Art Goes Heiligendamm, initiated by Adrienne Goehler with the support of the city, the state, various non-profits including the Heinrich Böll Foundation and individuals with various political and social interests (Spiegel Online 2007).

⁸⁵ At the time, this five-star hotel was managed by an international hotel chain. Today it is managed locally by Grand Hotel Heiligendamm GmbH (Welt Online 2009).

⁸⁶ The artist Joachim Stein proclaimed the event was “so bad that it was embarrassing.” His experience was marred by lousy installation design that produced an aural conflict between a theatre piece and a video, preventing him from paying attention to either one (Stein 2007). One reviewer noted that “[a] conspicuous number of works adopt a documentary position” (Grüter 2007).

⁸⁷ The prohibition was later declared unlawful (Ostsee-Zeitung 2011), but at the time, it stood.

ransom note. In a statement the artist explained that he chose it because it seemed sinister and threatening (Sekula 2007), a somewhat incongruous notion, given the elated mood of the phrase's textual source.

Despite the coordinated efforts of the coalition, which included experienced IndyMedia reporters (maquipix 2007), and the otherwise detailed website they built, very little documentation survives to tell us how these posters were used or where, exactly, they ended up. According to Karin Kasböck, who participated with the arts collective bankleer, they were distributed in public places, arts institutions, political meetings, and so forth, mostly through the personal networks of those involved. Holy Damn It also offered a limited edition set of all ten motifs, but only a few were sold (Kasböck 2013). An international program of talks and related exhibitions took place. Still, a few installation photographs endure on Flickr pages created by participating protesters. There, the Mexican welder takes his place among the cacophony of street art, jostled against the other posters, suggesting a disorganized but energetic mob [fig. 22].



Figure 23 bankleer. Installation view of posters made for Holy Damn It, Berlin, Germany, 2007. Allan Sekula's *Alle Menschen werden Schwestern* is visible in the middle to the left.

As G8 protestors attempted to block the road to Rostock, about 500 kilometers away in the interior, documenta 12 opened with *Shipwreck and Workers*, which so strained Hilde Van Gelder's physical abilities. This was Sekula's primary but not only contribution. The Mexican welder appeared here too, once again carrying Sekula's play on Schiller, this time at the main train station, ready to greet documenta's many visitors. At several times lifesize, with the image printed on front and back, suspended between two columns, it was an awesome and jarring image. It completely dwarfed other advertising panels scattered around the train station.

Its installation was less complex than the one at Bergpark, which had required a custom-designed quay to support the large image of a shipwreck. However, Rabea Welte, a member of the documenta technical team, still needed the permissions from KVG (Kasseler Verkehrs Gesellschaft AG), which manages the Kassel-Wilhelmshöhe Hauptbahnhof. Collaboration between KVG and the documenta organizers had become routine. The relationship between them

was essential, since an estimated 700,000 art fair visitors would use Kassel's public transit in 2007.⁸⁸ In a draft of her pitch to KVG, Welte emphasized Sekula's fame and status as a documenta alumnus. She described in detail the technical parameters of the proposed installation and identified the subject of the work as "a Mexican welder working in a harbor." For the rest, she relied on copy from the Holy Damn It press release, which made explicit the connection between the Sekula's artwork and opposition to the G8, criticizing global capitalism, stopping just short of calling for revolution.⁸⁹ Satisfied, she emailed the proposal to her boss, Technical Director Martin Müller. The documenta archives have this letter preserved only as a photocopy, so it is impossible to know who redacted the final text. In any case, key sections of the "background" were struck, including the phrase "many artists engaged with globalization critiques, such as privatization, exploitation of people and resources, war, torture and analysis of dominant power structures" which had been lifted directly from the press release (Welte 2007). The protest politics of Heiligendamm never penetrated the KVV office and Welte received permission to install the Mexican welder.

As with the Holy Damn It poster version, it is extremely difficult to recover the particular symbolic or affective meanings of the welder portrait in this context work due to lack of recorded first-hand impressions. But it is safe to say, I think, that it must have appeared very differently than it did in poster form. Not only was the scale greatly also but its elevated position isolated it from competing visual signs and rendered the figure monumental, not just another man in a crowd. It is not clear whether this transformation was merely an artifact of different contexts or whether the artist intended something by it, but the way the welder adapts his form as he migrates to perform different work in new contexts, strikes me as a significant statement about

⁸⁸ The KVV annual report speaks with obvious pride at its own high level of operational efficiency, despite the service challenges of serving so many new customers for such a short period of time (Oelemann 2007).

⁸⁹ The language has the prickly energy of the radical left. The full passage reads:

The artistic contributions deal with the hegemonic conditions and current issues about [sic] social movements against capitalist globalization: privatization, exploitation of human beings and resources, war, torture, escalating military mobilization from within as well as to the outside as a permanent state of exception, sexist violence and patriarchal as well as racist models of dominance. Moreover, the project deals with the power of global image (re-)production within capitalism and the development of ideas about of an emancipative and solidarity-oriented culture and society. (Dorfmueller 2007)

the universality of labor. What is clear, however, is that the political valence of this image would have been very different than in the context of an organized anti-G8 protest, and it seems that Sekula was content with that shift. In a brief interview conducted for the documenta 12 catalogue, he remarked that Schiller's *Ode to Joy*, "dances around the presumed subject of the revolution.... The citation recalls that the fraternity sworn in the heroic pathos of the Enlightenment is still an unfulfilled promise—and that all the parameters have changed" (Wieczorek, 2007, 300). Sekula is probably referring to Schiller's positive reception of the French Revolution. There is an ongoing debate as to whether Schiller originally intended to write an ode to *Freiheit* (freedom) rather than *Freude* (joy) (Hart 2009). There is evidence, for example, that the last final stanza from the 1785 version originally spoke of escaping tyrants' chains and the suggestive fact that Schiller had previously been censored. Issues of freedom and censorship are also at play in Sekula's photograph. Like Schiller's verse, it also "dances around" revolution by associating with the anti-globalization movement.

The image of the Mexican welder volleys back and forth between the impossibility of freedom and the impossibility of abandoning it as an idea. The crouching posture of the worker who is, for the moment, not working, might be interpreted as an open question about the possibility of social change. More powerful is the re-gendering of Schiller's line in this context. It is both a corrective and a reminder. It corrects the original sexism of the poem (which also included possession of a wife as a condition of membership in Schiller's idealized fraternity) and reminds us that not all the parameters have changed for the worse. After all, the thematic subtext of the Mexican welder portrait is the historical appearance of feminism itself, which both exposed the falseness of claims to universality grounded in the exclusion of women from the *Bund* while practically moving us closer to universality in so doing. The view that women should simply "rule the world" is a minority one. The stronger feminist position is the abolition of gendered privilege altogether, absurd in its impossibility yet tantalizing, a combination that gives "alle Menschen werden Schwestern" its powerful charge.

Women continue to face many struggles all over the world. But we ought not to overlook another key line from the famous poem, which directly precedes the mention of fraternity. Addressing joy directly, the poet writes, "Deine Zauber binden wieder / Was die Mode streng geteilt" (your magic re-joins what custom strictly divides)—suggesting a reconciliation of all social division. The palpable absence of any such magic in the photograph testifies to the work

that has yet to be done. Presumably, if this magic were to be unleashed and social divisions, such as the one between the American artist from the Mexican welder, were healed, the whole question of whether to attempt to ventriloquize the voice of the victim would not leave us in such ethical agonies, and we would be free of our powerlessness, our guilt, the exhaustion that comes from feeling guilty all the time and the easy forgetfulness that eventually replaces it. To live thus free would truly be a joy, and the power of these lines is amplified by the image of the Mexican welder who now appears as the universal brother (or, sister?) that Schiller (or Marx?) perhaps dreamed of.

The Mexican welder motif has since appeared in other contexts, including as a “fine art” print and as a billboard in Los Angeles.⁹⁰ It is beyond the scope of this discussion to discuss them all, as they take on quite different meanings in each context. One final exhibition that stands out, however, is VOLTAShow03, an art fair held in mid-June 2007, in Basel. Represented by the Santa Monica-based Christopher Grimes Gallery, Sekula’s work was hung on the exterior wall of the building, at the entrance to the fair.⁹¹ In some ways it was an appropriate setting for the Mexican welder, since the venue was a former industrial facility in Basel Harbor, owned by the Swiss logistics firm Ultra Brag, which provides container and transport services under the slogan “Wasser ist unser Weg” (“water is our way”).⁹² In this version, a 16 x 25-foot billboard-like print, Sekula removed the German text, so the welder spoke in a different voice, with a considerably more direct message: “Los ricos destuyen el planeta.” The “threatening” cut-and-paste lettering was stylistically identical to the previous version, but used a different, greenish palette. The accusation seems clear enough. But if read the work as a ransom note, then what or who was being ransomed?

The organizers conceived of VOLTA as an “elegant boutique fair,” with the particular

⁹⁰ In 2008 it was issued as a chromogenic print mounted on aluminum in a limited edition of 5, this time with the text, *Travaillez plus pour gagner plus*, the slogan used by the French government under Nicolas Sarkozy for a labor policy campaign launched the year before (Le Monde 2012). In 2010 the “Los ricos” version was included in a project called *How Many Billboards?* developed by the MAK Center for Art and Architecture, used outdoor billboards as an exhibition vehicle (Noever and Meyer 2010).

⁹¹ Christopher Grimes Gallery characterized this as a “commission” but it is unclear whether the VOLTA organizers or the gallery itself paid for the printing costs (Christopher Grimes Gallery 2007).

⁹² www.ultra-brag.ch

goal of “reaching beyond a marketplace atmosphere and creating an event that is even more exhibition than art fair” (VOLTAshow 2007a) while still being a marketplace and an art fair. Photos of the event show cubical-style mini-galleries and white walls that do little to distinguish it from any other global art fair. Post-show reckonings showed healthy numbers: 48 participating galleries did €5,835,000 in sales and the organizers happily predicted that this figure could double with sales closing in the following weeks, post-fair (VOLTAshow 2007b). The fair itself had been sponsored by the small Swiss bank Sallfort AG, which focuses on asset management for high net worth clients, or, in the vulgate of Occupy activists, the “one percent.”

Globalization proceeds unevenly, endowing some with more privileges than others, including the privilege of consuming images of others. Circulating among sites of concentrated power and cultural consumption, the Mexican welder risks becoming a spectacle of pity and liberal pathos. But his image does not travel alone. Like most of Sekula’s photographs the Mexican welder is accompanied by a text. At VOLTAshow, as in Heiligendamm and Kassel, the text did not represent the subject’s own voice. The text was appropriated, this time from Hervé Kempf’s work of political ecology, *Les riches détruisent la planete*. The title of this pamphlet-like book concisely summarizes its thesis: “The environmental crisis is due to human activity and is the direct consequence of the present economic system” (that is, capitalism) (2007, 17). Or, as Greg Palast writes plainly in the foreword: “environmental devastation is class war by other means” (Kempf 2007, viii). Kempf argues for extending the definition of “poverty” beyond income and cost of living to include changed environmental conditions. He appeals, somewhat uncritically despite his Marxism, to the norms of “public freedoms and common good” (2007, 99) to make this argument, but might have appealed more productively to the framework of human rights, particularly the right to equality, instead (O’Brien et al. 2010). Increasingly the “common” good is harder to pin-point, as the gap between rich and poor widens and political interests become polarized. Human rights provides a framework for negotiating competing interests while allowing that there may be no good that is common to all groups.

Montaging elements from different contexts may make the work less “realistic,” but only from the perspective that understands which a realistic representation as a relationship of adequacy to the reality it supposedly represents. Sekula is less interested in playing the role of the heroic documentary photographer who captures the authentic voice of an exotic subject, than in inverting the terms of adequacy. Rather than striving after authenticity, hoping to adequately

represent a globalized world that vastly exceeds its representation in complexity and extent, Sekula confronts the utopian content of the idea of globalization—truly universality of rights and privileges for all humans—with the failure of the reality of globalization to live up to that dream. It is not representation that has failed to be adequate to reality, but reality that has failed to be adequate to the concept's utopian truth. Rather than closing distances, it reconfigures them; rather than making travel and communication instantaneous, it re-routes them; rather than flattening social privilege into a horizontal meritocratic social plane, globalization conceals it. The flip-side of “flexibility” is insecurity. Adorno observed a similar operation already in his own time. In *Negative Dialectics*, he observed: “The concept of freedom lags behind itself as soon as we apply it empirically. ... But because it must always be also the concept of what it covers, it is to be confronted with what it covers.” (1966, 151).

The itinerary of the Mexican welder makes this point in a different way. International travel has recently been intensified following the globalization of markets for contemporary art. Another aspect of globalization is the inability to go anywhere, being poor, stuck with an undesirable passport, lacking the resources read and complete the paperwork or maybe even the bribe that would provide an exit by other means. Rather than traveling, the global poor can only hope to escape. Returning home, I imagine, would be even harder. I have been writing about the Mexican welder using utopian language: the Mexican welder “travelled,” I wrote, to the G8 protests, to Kassel for documenta, to VOLTAshow for Basel, to Los Angeles and elsewhere. A glamorous itinerary indeed, for a worker from a poor country—but that is not the fate of the man. *Ceci n'est pas un homme*, after all, but an image of one. As it turns out, it is easier for a man's image to travel when it is called art than it is for the man himself. And this is an important point: Sekula could have made a picture of a man suffering and oppressed by his circumstances. The portrait, however, keeps the circumstances of the man open, so he *can* travel to these different contexts, evoking the very real dream of perfect freedom to travel for every individual who wishes to, while powerfully, if negatively, reminding us of the countless bodies that remain grounded in their place by the force of circumstance.

“How do you go from the here-and-now of the worker to the extraordinarily complex global flows of capital?” Hal Foster once asked Sekula, during a discussion at the Art Museum of the University of California, Berkeley (Sekula and Foster 1995, 14). If Sekula's constellation has done its work, we should see globalization, and the problem it poses to representation,

differently. The original problem of adequately representing its sublime vastness was, at its core, a problem of representation. We have seen its urgency and validity dissolved into a new challenge that is a problem of practice, but no easier to overcome, namely, that of recovering globalization's utopian promise for real social change. Of course, as Adorno made clear in his *Antrittsvorlesung*, the two are related, for it is precisely at the moment when philosophy dissolves the problem of realism-as-adequacy that the non-identical shimmers through as a practical challenge for art and politics. On that point, I will let the artist have the last word: "What we have is a bad aesthetics and a bad politics fused into a control machine, and what we have to achieve is some other model, where the play between aesthetics and politics can be opened up to the dream of freedom, and the survival of that is part of the human project" (Sekula 2011).

5.0 CONCLUSION

In this dissertation I have tried to argue for an understanding of realism as something other than a philosophical position, a visual style or merely a second-order unmasking of the truth that there is none. Instead, I have tried to show that realism is an ethical proposition, which is achieved in art through structures that communicate the priority of the object. In my examples, I have shown how this can be achieved through motifs of the intersection, illegibility and constellation, and how these motifs are articulated through particular formal features (for example, Sekula's use of diptychs and triptychs to assemble a subject over the course of several temporal intervals).

To do this I have also argued that the problem of realism can be productively framed as a problem of identity-thinking, thereby providing access to the language of dialectical criticism, and opening up a path between identities of difference and the negative philosophy of Adorno. As Bill Brown put it in "Thing Theory," Adorno grasped the "alterity of things as an essentially ethical fact. Most simply put, his point is that accepting the otherness of things is the condition for accepting otherness as such" (2001, 12). Or, in other words, distilled in the epigraph Brown selected from philosopher Michel Serres: "le sujet naît de l'objet." Stopping short of arguing for a "realist" Adorno, I have tried to wrap his dialectical materialism around recent photo-based art, to show his hostility to figurative art (particularly to the art championed by Lukács) to be less a feature inherent in his philosophy than an artifact of the period in which it emerged.⁹³ His affections for abstraction in art and literature make little sense today when critical and political

⁹³ Fredric Jameson refers to it as "a new dialectical objectivity" (1990, 35). See also O'Connor on Adorno and "givenness" (2004) and Deborah Cook on his treatment of nature (Cook 2007). Cook and Hall have also focused on Adorno's "critical materialism" in recent work (Cook 2006; Hall 2011). Espen Hammer takes a different angle, arguing for the centrality of metaphysics to Adorno's thought (2006).

possibilities for figurative art are everywhere affirmed, especially in the context of a media-saturated environment dominated by screens. Today, the old modernist taboo on figuration appears particularly outdated as film, photography and video are recognized as legitimate media for serious contemporary art. And yet, as we have seen, the old iconoclasm hangs on in unexpected ways, recently reappearing as a taboo on reality itself, where figurative images are understood to refer only to other images. Against this view I have tried to argue that contemporary artists like Jeff Wall are powerful representatives of a distinctly contemporary practice that is realist *because* it is dialectically negative, or, critical. This does not mean there is no value left in representation critique. It does mean that critical realism is something other than naturalistic figuration. Indeed, recovering negativity within figuration can be understood, I think, as consistent with a politics of identity that critiques representation when realism is treated as a problem of ethics and not merely an outdated framework that ethics ought to replace.

Finally, I have suggested that reframing realism as a broader problem of intersubjectivity rather than a restricted epistemological one, offers the best explanation for realism's continued attraction. What is striking about the recent realist and materialist literature, in art history as well as in social and political theory, is the persistence of a powerful desire for things as they are, rather than objects as we experience them from our individual points of view. As I noted in my introduction, considering its fraught history, realism should not be attractive at all. Everywhere around us reality seems to be ailing: online identities, drone warfare, virtual currency, digital photography, infotainment and so on, combined with postmodern or post-structural skepticism about the possibilities of objective knowledge, threaten the stability of cherished notions of reality and its cognate concepts (document, fact, objectivity, materiality, etc.) The German artist Hito Steyerl, who has become a prominent artist and theorist of the new documentary art, claims that we ought to understand reality *as* images—or maybe vice versa, since there is no difference between them: “Images do not represent reality, they create reality, they are second nature. Things among other things, image-objects, image-events, image-situations, image-bodies” (Steyerl and Rourke 2013, n. p.). If images have totally colonized reality, what good is realism? And yet, realism has become increasingly important in recent years, along with the document, the archive and the notion of witnessing. Indeed, one might plausibly argue that intensified interest in realism is being stimulated in large part by a sense that reality itself is disappearing. Certainly, some critics have interpreted the documentary turn in these terms, on which point,

Steyerl writes elsewhere, this time with curator Maria Lind: “The double bind is strong: on the one hand documentary images are more powerful than ever. On the other hand, we have less and less faith in documentary representations” (Lind and Steyerl 2008, 11).

Obviously, there are pragmatic reasons for holding on to reality, especially if we are at all politically inclined. When Amnesty International reports that 2012 has been the most profitable year ever for arms dealers with over \$50 billion US in sales, we may doubt the figure’s accuracy and may doubt the possibility of accuracy in calculating this figure at all. But few of us are radical enough to doubt that arms sales occur or that American currency circulates. Or that the Gulf War took place. This is not to contest the notion that knowledge is produced through the movements of power. Amnesty International, like the United States Treasury and arms dealers, is an institution with its own political discourse. We are free to accept or contest the particular reality it produces. But reality as a concept is not politically selective in the same fashion. The idea of reality as such is indispensable to every position along the political spectrum, not unlike the concepts of freedom or justice. It is especially precious to liberal and progressive thinkers in the current political climate. Even Bruno Latour, himself a major advocate of social constructionism in science studies, has expressed doubts about the politics of anti-realist approaches:

...entire Ph.D. programs are still running to make sure that good American kids are learning the hard way that facts are made up, that there is no such thing as natural, unmediated, unbiased access to truth, that we are always prisoners of language, that we always speak from a particular standpoint, and so on, while dangerous extremists are using the very same argument of social construction to destroy hard-won evidence that could save lives. (Latour 2004, 227)

In addition to these pragmatic concerns, the pull of reality can be best explained, I think, when we see the desire for things-as-they-are as a desire for a reconfigured relationship to them. It strikes me that, as it stands, we cannot access thing-as-they-are, not because some Kantian cognitive categories are getting in the way, or because of ideology, or because the media is interfering, but for the simpler reason that our social arrangements generate a constant state of conflict, where things are coerced into being things they are not. One of the consequences of social contestation is that conditions of hybridity or liminality permeate contemporary cultural experience (to appropriate an older argument of Latour’s); nevertheless, these categories cannot

adequately capture the structured particularity of things if they are treated as generalized conditions that equally describe all people of all classes, everywhere. For this reason, in narrowing the short-list of candidates to include for analysis in this dissertation, I particularly focused on artworks that incorporated difference into their structures, whether embodied in a duality (between painting and photography, for example) or mapped across a great geographic distance (the itinerary of a containership between sites of production and consumption). It is in these passages of heterogeneity that concrete alternatives to current social arrangements are most likely to emerge. Of course, to develop a substantial politics that would fully understand difference in its difference would require first reorganizing ourselves collectively in a non-coercive, non-objectifying, non-violent way, in a way that recognizes them as bearers of rights, not just despite their difference, but *in* their difference. In the case of other humans, this means human rights. I would transgress the scope of this dissertation to comment on the possibility of such a project; my rather more limited interest is clarifying how contemporary realist art derives its critical content in the riddle of difference.

What appeared as a problem of epistemology, then, reappears as a problem for ethics. This goes considerably further in explaining why our hunger for reality is not extinguished, but grows, as we register its gradual disappearance. And here I want to suggest that the loss of reality and the anxiety that follows was not new to the 1990s, but has a longer history embedded in the history of modernism itself. The desire for systematic and encyclopedic knowledge appeared with the Enlightenment, and soon thereafter the colonial ambitions that allowed scientific enquiry access to exotic lands and peoples. Seen dialectically, what the modern subject hungers for is not just complete knowledge of the world as it is, but a complete experience of itself. Because we are also a part of the world, an object in it among others and an other *to* others, an inability to know the world fully entails an inability to know the self. Indeed the very fact that I constitute a *self*, a something that observes itself, as it were, from only one location, means this blindness, this dark spot, this boundary can never be overcome. However sensitive I am to interpersonal dynamics, my experience of myself cannot include others' experiences of me because their experiences are by definition theirs; I am bound to myself by the blunt fact of how I exist within myself as a particular body.

In its work to acquire knowledge and make a home of the world, the subject reaches for objects, only to discover that the very act of reaching itself, the outward extension of

subjectivity, pushes objects beyond its reach. Knowledge is forever incomplete. And yet the experiences others have of me—although different from mine and different, doubtless, from each other—are not less *real* therefore. They are not “merely” subjective, cannot be wished away or dismissed by those who have them. Each of the minute qualities that my friends, family and colleagues attach to me are true to those who experience them, untrue to those who do not, and totally outside my field of possible experience altogether. There is a part of me that is real but that remains unknowable to me.

So rather than despair and embrace relativism as a last, awful resort, we might consider the ways that the incompleteness of knowledge is structured, with the hope of discovering a less destructive way of relating to those who are our others. Framing the problem in this way, using Hegelian language, lends the entire problem a sickly, modern-Western color, and I recognize that in fact this is by far not the only way of thinking about global intersubjectivity. Even Adorno and his coauthor, Horkheimer, who together witnessed from exile the astonishing practical effects of bureaucratic efficiency on expansionist, nationalist ambitions, could hardly anticipate the ecological terrors that now regularly threaten from the seas and skies. Although we shudder at the ticking clock and spin apocalyptic fantasies enough to nourish several action movie sub-genres, imagining robust alternatives to the impending global catastrophe (whether economic, ecological or military) is difficult if not impossible, suggesting, tragically, that the only world safe from the destruction of instrumental reason would have to be a world without us in it. And this is an almost unbearably sad thought, an idea that we approach but cannot fully embrace, for it would mean accepting the absoluteness of the conflict between our existence and a peaceful world, which would be the end of all hope.

Hence the nervous fascination with books that explore human absence on a large scale, such as the speculative projections in *A World Without Us* (Weisman 2007). Perhaps the closest visual equivalent in photos of “the world’s most beautiful abandoned places” which have become a pop-culture phenomenon, spreading virally on the Internet.⁹⁴ The unavoidably

⁹⁴ These appeared on the website Buzzfeed in late March and at time of writing had been shared 60,000 times on Facebook, 9000 times on twitter and 3000 times by email. The cheeky byline read: “Can’t wait until the world ends and EVERYTHING looks like this” (Ringerud and Stopera 2013). Polidori’s photographs have been published in the monograph *Zones of Exclusion* (Polidori and Culbert 2003).

seductive image of the object, thriving, independent of us, indeed, *free from* us, whether other ways of life or virgin wilderness, untouched, by the hand, by the eye—or even of the consciousness—of modern humans, sustains the illusion of a world of total and equal objectivity. This world of equal objectivity entails equal subjectivity as well and this is the world that realism promises to give us. Realism probes the wound even as it soothes. It cannot simply be given up.

As it turns out, photography is particularly powerful at achieving these effects. Although I do not feel that critical realism is dependent on any particular technical support or presentation format, I should say a few words about photography, since the artists in this study have engaged the medium and its history so deliberately. There are many accounts of what makes photography special; many of these point to the medium's mechanical or "automatic" character. This is something that makes some intuitive sense only in the way a cliché does, at the end of the road of verifiability. Instead of traveling that road yet again, I turn to Stanley Cavell, who as we shall see, and despite what one might initially think given his long meditations on the technical differences between a phonograph record and a photograph, has useful things to say about ethics and difference. Cavell does not argue that photography's uniqueness derives from its "indexicality" although his claim does not contradict the possibility that something like "mechanical" transcription is at work.⁹⁵ What's refreshing is that Cavell's argument does not need indexicality, which after enduring decades of criticism⁹⁶ has recently been revived in tedious arguments that once again locate the artist's creativity and originality in its overcoming.⁹⁷

⁹⁵ Whatever that may be. For a concise and substantial summary of the "mechanical" arguments for photographic realism and related "foundational problems" see Costello and Phillips (2008).

⁹⁶ I have in mind primarily Joel Snyder's arguments. See his contribution to the roundtable on Photography Theory for a summary of this view (Elkins 2007, 369-400). His challenge has been ignored; for example, one of the contributors to Kelsey and Stimson's revisionist volume (Kelsey and Stimson 2005) single out Elkins, Martin Lefebvre, Rosalind Krauss, and Liz Wells but not Snyder as interlocutors; the other simply asserts that the index is a trace, a "this" that "points to a verifies an existence and a history" (Doane 2005, 12) as if it the meaning of those terms were transparent—and this is exactly the problem that Snyder critiques.

⁹⁷ The notion that photography is uniquely positioned as a candidate for "critical" realism because its native state is realism also implies that painting, which lacks this native state, is not a candidate for critical realism at all. Hilde Van Gelder's claim is typical in this regard: "The photo digs its critical potential out of this privileged relationship to reality; it really has something to say about it because it arises out of it" (quoted in Baetens and Van Gelder 2006, 9-10). For additional, similar examples, see Giuliani Paolini (quoted in Witkovsky 2012, 167),

Rather, he says, photography's mysterious realism comes from its temporality, the way its perpetual pastness is experienced in the present: "The reality in a photograph is present to me while I am not present to it; and a world I know, and see but to which I am nevertheless not present (through no fault of my subjectivity), is a world past" (Cavell 1971, 23).

This perhaps explains the powerful, visceral attraction of recent images of urban or industrial decay (known colloquially as "ruin porn"⁹⁸). Among photographers currently exploring this subgenre, Robert Polidori's pictures of nature's stubborn flourishing among the ruins of Chernobyl and Pripyat stand out; he has also made similar pictures of old Havana, which closely follow the tradition established by Victorian photographers such as Calvert Jones (1802-1877) and Benjamin Brecknell Turner (1815-1894) or the *Mission Héliographique*. For generations of photographers, there has been a unique challenge (or paradox?) in visualizing the battle between the world's greatest monuments and the inevitable ravages of time. In many ways,

Davidts and Green (quoted in Baetens and Van Gelder 2006, 130 and 128 respectively), Linsley (1989, 31), Folland (1988) and Kuspit (1982, 54).

This just repeats Victorian (and later, Pictorialist, and later, Modernist) arguments that being an artist using photography means doing something other—something *more* (creative, valuable, critical)—than what photography does by itself, thereby implying that photography does something by itself. In *Pictorial Effects in Photography* (1869) H. P. Robinson writes, "we can add truth to bare facts" (Trachtenberg 1980, 92) and valorizes the "photographer's individual impression of the subject" (96). Similar beliefs were held by P. H. Emerson, who states aphoristically, in *Naturalistic Photography* (1889): "[i]t is not the apparatus that chooses the picture, but the *man* [sic] who wields it" (103, emphasis original) and, on attempting to negotiate that sticky balance between subjectivity and objectivity: "all poetry is in nature, but different individuals see different amounts of it" (Trachtenberg 1980, 104). No surprise, then, that Alfred Stieglitz endorsed this view, but so did Lewis Hine, for completely different reasons. According to the *Proceedings* of the June 1909 National Conference of Charities and Corrections, Hine justified his photographic reform efforts by claiming that the picture is a compact, unified "story" and is "often more effective than the reality would have been, because, in the picture, the non-essential and conflicting interests have been eliminated" (111). All these positions argue that the source of value in their enterprises lie in their human craft, skill, creativity and unique individual vision, against the implicit assumption that their absence would be artless, meaningless contact between reality and a machine—non-human object and non-human object, a state of raw nature untouched by *Geist* or awaiting passage into commodity-status by value-added human labor. Recent moves to established photography as a legitimate medium for contemporary art recapitulate the structure of this argument substituting "critique" for "creativity" so that critical realism is, above all, a critique of native photographic realism.

⁹⁸ For example, "Detroit ruin porn" is a searchable tag used by the *Huffington Post* at www.huffingtonpost.com/tag/detroit-ruin-porn.

this genre imitates the still-older Neoclassical and Romantic paintings of antiquity's faded grandeur, but photography's particular pastness combines with the pastness of the subject itself to unique effect, between documentary utility and sublime awe.

Andrew Moore (b. 1957) has become famous for his luscious scenes of Detroit, which is slowly disappearing as its man-made structures are digested by organic bodies. Without the feathered surfaces of peeling paint or the collapsed buildings, we would have no way of grasping the passage of time at all. An empty field is timeless but a field with the skeletal remains of a house has a different temporality that contrasts the bounded linearity of human life with the unending cycles of the seasons. A photograph of that same house registers both the tension between human time and natural timelessness, while stamping both with the time of its making, which is transcended in the photographic print. In *National Time clock, former Cass Technical High School building* (2009), this layering of times is illustrated in a particularly acute (some might say, heavy-handed) fashion, in a photograph of a clock whose plastic face has slid down, like sagging skin over a skull, pulling the numbers with it until they are distorted and compressed [fig. 23]. The effect is less surreal than one might expect given the unavoidable resemblance to its iconic painted cousin in Dalí's *The Persistence of Memory* (1931); instead, it is genealogically closer to the Romantic occupations of *Ozymandias*. Like a photograph, the inscription on the pedestal in Percy Bysshe Shelley's poem points to the moment of its making. Which is fitting, if problematic, since Moore and the curators at the Akron Art Museum, who staged an exhibition of Moore's Detroit work, understand the fate of the American rustbelt exactly as did the early Romantics did the ruins of Egypt, Rome or the Mediterranean, without politics or scandal.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ In his artist statement published in the catalogue, Moore wrote, "Although poor leadership on many levels has beset the city, the true engineer behind its disassembly is Janus-faced nature, which renews as it ravages this shadowed metropolis" (Moore 2010, 119). Similarly, Barbara Tannenbaum, Director of Curatorial Affairs and Mitchell Kaham, director & CEO, write, in the "Afterword" that Moore "sees in the abandonment of large sections of Detroit a timeless theme: the human struggle to control nature by dominating the land. The scarce inhabitants of Piranesi's etchings of eighteenth-century Rome are the ancestors of more than a few modern-day Detroiters" (Moore 2010, 122). (Moore himself is from Old Greenwich, Connecticut.)



Figure 24 Andrew Moore, *National Time clock*, former Cass Technical High School building, 2009, digital chromogenic print scanned from film negative, 86.3 x 68.5 cm. Collection of Fred and Laura Ruth Bidwell, Cleveland, Ohio.

To return to Cavell, we might say that photography's unique asynchrony is like a two-way mirror that permits ontological travel in one direction only, so the subject is absent in a reality to which it nevertheless has visual access. But that is not all. With the parenthetical "through no fault of my subjectivity" Cavell lightly insists that the subject has done nothing in particular to bring about this state of affairs. This implies a temporary loss of agency, which I think is no loss at all but a relief—of censure and perhaps, at a stretch, culpability. Photography's temporality has managed to secure not just my absence to the reality it represents but also a circumscription of my subjectivity. Once again, the goal is not to eliminate subjectivity, which in any case is impossible, but to experience it in a way that does not induce existential nausea at the prospect of nature's sublime indifference to human existence. Rather, photography reconnects us with reality through a presence or presentness of the world—or more properly, in dialectical terms, by presenting us with the illusion (Schein) that it does so. For this reason realism always contains an element of fantasy, myth, and utopian longing—which contributors to the current debate, such as Steyerl and Lind, Nash, Lafer and others, rightly recognize. Like Adorno before him and Enwezor after, Cavell concludes that the achievement of full subjectivity requires the presence of the world, and so places this alterity at the core of what we value in aesthetic experience: "Apart from the wish for selfhood (hence the always simultaneous granting of otherness as well), I do not understand the value of art," Cavell writes. "Apart from this wish and its achievement, art is exhibition" (1971, 22) (by which I take him to mean something like Fried's theatricality, an emptying of intersubjectivity).

The delicious satisfaction we derive from fantasies of our own absence—seeing without being seen, or more radically, of having the world present without being present to it—has been used to explain the pleasure produced by a great many images, including paintings. This idea will be familiar to readers of Michael Fried, who takes credit for having told the story of modernism by tracing the emergence of the presentness as its central problem (Fried 1980). But Fried is less interested in the explicitly ethical consequences of viewing than in intersubjectivity as a formal device, providing a model of intersubjectivity without a subject and beholding without a (sexed, raced, classed) beholder, which is either paradoxical or incomplete. Despite his indifference to social categories, Fried's anti-theatrical model is not conceptually inconsistent with account of critical realism I have described in this dissertation. For Fried, the possibility of experiencing aesthetic pleasure is dependent upon the illusion of ontological independence

created by the artwork; one such way of crafting this illusion pictorially is to represent a figure deeply absorbed in an activity, conveying the impression that they are immune to the distraction presented by whatever is happening on the viewer's side of the picture plane. The illusion must be convincing if the work is to be deemed successful. In place of artistic quality, I have been concerned to elaborate a concept of critical realism, but what my model shares with Fried's is an emphasis on a separation between subject and object that nevertheless achieves communication between them. With Fried's anti-theatrical artwork, the beholder attends to an object according to convention, which, however, does not return the gesture, producing aesthetic pleasure ("conviction"). With critical realism, the beholder's subjectivity is restrained, providing a "communication of what is differentiated" (Adorno 2005, 247)—a fuller view of otherness than is normally accessible to instrumental reason. Fried's insights about the particular attraction of absorptive paintings is not invalidated by my observations, but enriched with social significance.

If mapping critical realism onto anti-theatricality exposes the social stakes of modern beholding, it also exposes the social stakes in Fried's worries about objecthood. If the satisfaction we derive from anti-theatrical art is caused by the illusion of independence it creates, then perhaps the anxiety about objecthood can be attributed to its corresponding opposite: the image of subjugation of object to subject. More specifically, one might read the threat of objecthood as the threat of commodification as it penetrates the aesthetic field. For many Marxist critics, the latter is rather more distressing than artwork pandering to its beholder, because artistic production has long been thought, for various reasons, to be immune (or at least, resistant) to the logic of commercial exploitation. Although Fried is as indifferent to exploitation as he is to politics, his observations about objecthood might be acute if radically incomplete observations about the vulnerability of reality.

We may recall how Marx characterizes the commodity. What is special about commodities, Marx thought, is that we are blinded by their exchange value; whether it is a luxurious or common thing, we think its value derives from the kind of thing it is, and believe, equally, that this is reflected in what we pay for it. But this is just an illusion. The value of commodities actually derives the labor that brought them into being. Commodities are actually "social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses" (Marx and Engels 1978, 320-21).

Now it is hard to imagine a more powerful image of this phenomenon than minimal art, which I say despite the obvious commodity character of Pop. Essential to Pop are drama and storytelling, or at least the memory of dramatic pathos, etched into the consumer narratives crafted by PR firms to trigger desires and anxieties, which survive in the finished artwork. Yet sex, death, food and money—even when reduced to formulas—allowed artists such as Oldenburg and Warhol to retain their connections to human needs. Minimalism’s constricted, regular forms, by contrast, subsume the human within a compositional rigor produced by placing one thing after another, all manufactured to precisely the same specifications. This powerfully evokes industrial capacities, by banishing evidence of facture, figuration, and structuring negative space as if in anticipation of extending into it. Obviously I have in mind modular work like Donald Judd’s floor-to-ceiling stacks or Dan Flavin’s light “barriers,” but these observations also apply to singular sculptural pieces like Tony Smith’s *Die* (1962). The same industrial logic has also been applied effectively to cultural products, as Horkheimer and Adorno observed, and increasingly to service industries too.

The latent anthropomorphism that Fried talks about in “Art and Objecthood”—the feeling that, in the presence of a minimalist work or group of works, one senses the uncanny “silent presence of another *person*” or his observations about the human scale of *Die*—do not detract from, but rather reinforce my argument about commodification, precisely because it is in the nature of commodities to be vital, silent, and secretive about their humanness. We should not be surprised then, that Fried describes *Die* as marked by “the quality of having an *inside* ... as though the work in question has an inner, even secret life” (Fried 1998, 156-57), which echoes in a different context Marx’s famous passage on commodity fetishism: a commodity is a “mysterious” and “enigmatical” thing that conceals the secret of exploitative social relations within the product of labor (Marx 1976, 320). While Pop art resembles specific commodities, the resemblance is literally and deliberately superficial; by contrast, Minimal art mimics the commodity’s structure and subtle affective valences.

In this context it is interesting to revisit *Homes for America* (1966), a piece in which Minimalism and commodification are morphologically linked through photography. In this photo-text work, Dan Graham shows rows of identical tract houses, and the accompanying text explains how the color schemes and floor plans are configured to balance a desire on the part of home-owners for customized individuality without sacrificing the economies of scale required

for efficient and profitable residential development. Graham uses the repetitious schemas to demonstrate how aesthetics has become functionalized in an attempt to provide the illusion of freedom of choice to suburban consumers (Buchloh 1977). Perhaps not incidentally, Buchloh calls Graham's schemas "reality structures"—found forms that are able to dialectically reflect upon the conditions of artistic production (1977, 121). Graham himself resisted that reading.¹⁰⁰ Still, if the artist did not intend *Homes for America* to be read as a comment on minimalism per se, he was clearly occupied with the aestheticization of everyday life in postwar consumer society, as made evident by the text and the fact that it was destined for an ephemeral format: the magazine spread.¹⁰¹

If the threat of objecthood is the threat of reification in disguise then perhaps we are back on the old familiar battleground of avant-garde and kitsch. But there is more at stake than simply keeping art quarantined from consumer culture, a project that has come to seem hopeless or trivial or maybe both. There is no doubt that art is a species of commodity; the more important question is what kinds of social relationships do artworks conceal or reveal? As labor is outsourced to locations that are geographically remote and thus, practically invisible to consumers, the ethics of our relations with objects becomes murkier than ever. Not only do most of us not understand where our stuff comes from, as Sekula sought to demonstrate, we are also mostly ignorant of how it got here. More than ever do commodities have secret inner lives and their fetishistic power seems unassailable. Yet as long as things are being exchanged, our relationships to objects remain a part of a larger web of real social relationships, as Marx pointed out, whether their cultural status is elevated or low.

An interest in tracing these relationships drives much contemporary realist and documentary art. Sometimes this interest manifests as a systematic, rigorous research, which lends structure and material to the final work; sometimes it entails a looser form of storytelling. Often, the two are mixed. And this is where I think critical realism might find wider application,

¹⁰⁰ "Buchloh thinks it's a sociological critique of minimal art. In fact, it's a celebration of Italian-American petit bourgeois" (Graham 2011, 9).

¹⁰¹ It was Graham's goal to work in a disposable format. He intended to avoid the mistake that Lichtenstein had made (in his opinion) of elevating popular material to the level of high art (Graham 2011, 11-12).

as photography's traditional technical means of support and forms of presentation are being overrun with installation, new media and screen-based forms.

Hito Steyerl's film and video work, for example, functions in this hybrid manner, and her videos are often structured around a quest for information. In *Lovely Andrea* (2007), for example, she documents her search for an old photograph of herself made for a fetish magazine while she was a student in Tokyo. Because this genre of photography is so rigid in its conventions and so voluminous, it is hard to distinguish Steyerl's picture from the countless other, similar ones. Steyerl's film wanders around the rich cluster of themes this subject produces. Video documentation of her research trip to Japan is intercut with clips from *Spiderman* cartoons, Shirley and Company singing "Shame" and photos of Guantanamo Bay prisoners among other sundries, crafting an allusive montage that sometimes produces its own brand of humor. (When a Japanese bondage model is asked what she wants to study in school, she answers, "Web design.") But the seriousness of the themes comes out in other segments, where a photographer admits to exploiting the models until they get sick of the abuse and quit, leaving their wages behind. At the end of the journey (and I won't give away the ending), Steyerl is being interviewed. The interlocutor says, "I still don't know what your film is about." In this, it is very much like Allan Sekula's photo-narratives, which can move convincingly from US naval power to a Japanese fish market to Frank Gehry within the confines of a single project (Phillips 2002), producing an elusive or distributed subject that exists only across objects, places or points in time, like joints without a body, or, a constellation. This is often experienced as jarring,¹⁰² because it is particular, and the particular is almost always obscure.

What *is* Steyerl's film about? Superficially, it is about the disappearance of the body behind the infinite regress of images, but there is a way of looking at it that brings it closer to the critical realism I have been exploring in this dissertation. What dominates this film is its unstructured structure, the way it moves forwards, then sideways, linking Japan and Germany

¹⁰² Sekula's critics have often mentioned the complexity of his work and how it requires slow looking. One commentator even suggests that what might superficially be taken for a commentary on the complexity of mediation can eventually be seen as something deeper, and more intimate: "we experience a quiet pleasure. Almost a recognition. Rather than looking at images, we begin to sense a web of meanings. This web has a familiar texture. It does not just remind one of mediatized reality, but also of the unequal, complex formation of lived actuality" (Westphalen 2003).

along the axis of the filmmaker's personal history, which then crosses broader economies of photography, sex, pop culture, censorship and translation in a montage of free-association. Although its subject is elusive, the connections resonate. In the clip featuring Shirley and Company singing "Shame on you!" a pixelated blur crosses the stage, as if masking the identity of an invisible ghost. This musical track plays again as Steyerl enters the enormous library of bondage magazine back issues, and the staff member who receives her and her film crew ask to have his identity hidden. Steyerl obliges, and staff appear only as pixelated ghosts, once again affirming the stubborn power of photography to stick to its referent despite the consolidation of digital technology. Interestingly, it is by agreeing to hide the man's identity that Steyerl gets permission to bring her cameras in at all, in a fascinating and high-stakes exchange, where one identity is obscured (the video librarian) so another may be accessed (Steyerl's old photo). In other words the transaction is enabled through a mutual recognition of the rights of both parties: the man's right to control his own image, to protect himself from shame or censure of others, and Steyerl's right to access her own image and to collect the pieces of her past.

In his review of *Lovely Andrea*, Pablo Lafuente claimed that "it is irrelevant whether Steyerl ever posed for the bondage photograph, or whether the image she ends up finding is hers" (Lafuente 2008), implying that the premise could do its job equally well either way. He also noted that one of the interviewees in the film¹⁰³ refers to it as a "mystery novel" suggesting that the premise may as well be fiction. While I would agree that the "mystery" here is used as a device, this does not mean documentary is equivalent to fiction, or that the question about the photograph's truth is irrelevant. Structurally, for the film to work, the device must convince the audience to invest psychologically in the outcome of Steyerl's quest, whatever the filmic genre, and this depends on the idea that there is a truth, however fragile, waiting to be discovered in the course of watching. Otherwise, the artist's motivations would make no sense. We believe that her need to encounter the past inspires her to fly to Japan, to dig through mountains of photographs and find her younger self. Lafuente appears to have confused a device with a *mere* device; here the question about the discovery of the photograph *is* central because it drives the entire film. Steyerl is clearly interested in how images shape our memories, especially those accumulated through exposure to popular culture, but she is also concerned with the way that

¹⁰³ Matsumoto Yutaka, editor at Sanwa Erotica.

historical traumas come to disturb the present. If there was no crime, why bother going through the motions of solving it? Retracing the past is one very important way we do this and we will not be satisfied unless certain things fall into place.

That said, it's true that Steyerl never explains what, exactly she will use the photograph for, or what it means to her (although she does say posing for it made her ashamed.) While it's true that there is no way of ascertaining whether this photograph is important to the real-life individual Hito Steyerl, the same is true about the intentions of any artist and are just about as relevant to the finished work of art and anyway, this importance is not the type that is at issue in Lafuente's claim. I am more struck by the fact that the "smoking gun" at the center of *Lovely Andrea* is no gun at all, but a photograph. Although there are many photographs of girls who look like her, Steyerl is not looking a picture that looks like hers, she is looking for *hers*, and the mission will not be complete until she finds it. When a Japanese rope master offers to tie her up and make a new picture, she declines. The conditions are clear: it must be a picture of her and of her past.

The quest is complicated by the fact that "Andrea" is the name Steyerl borrowed from her childhood friend, Andrea Wolf, who starred in Steyerl's first film and later died a martyr for Kurdish independence. (She was shot as a terrorist by the Turkish army in 1998.) In *November* (2004), Steyerl tells Wolf's story, once again intercutting original footage with found material and interviews. It is hardly a straightforward biography, however, and Steyerl shows as much interest in Wolf's image as she does in her actions and character. In many ways, this is the kind of film that we have come to associate with theories of the free-floating signifier, and Steyerl herself has been a key contributor to theories of this kind [Steyer 2002, 2003, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2009]). Certainly there is no denying the powerful role mediation plays, both in *November* and in Steyerl's work generally, nevertheless, there is no warrant to conclude that fact and fiction have become utterly entangled, even when it is clear that the "smoking gun" will never be found. If we approach this work with critical realism in mind, what becomes clear is that reality is complex, and we may argue about it from various perspectives and for different reasons, but it is not "merely" constructed, arbitrary or relative.

From the perspective of critical realism, *November* actually hews closer to history than poststructural semiotic approaches could discern. In the opening sequence Steyerl's voice-over informs us that Wolf was her best friend and was later shot as a terrorist by the Turkish army.

Over the grainy Super-8 reels of a young Andrea fighting bad guys with her girl gang, Steyerl's voiceover states, "This is my first film. This is me. This is Andrea." It is true that the demonstrative pronoun "this" here refers to mere images, not to objects themselves but there is nothing unsettling or unusual in this deferral of presence; we refer to images—particularly photographs—like this all the time ("This is me at age five," "This is my brother with our dog"). In fact, Steyerl's performance of the family photo album ritual is so familiar, so natural, that were the names or the images of Steyerl and Wolf reversed we would experience a full-blown falsehood, to which we could respond, with confidence: no, that is not Wolf; that is Steyerl. Despite the semiotic layering, the powerful pointing gesture of predication ("this is") is the same mechanism that will later allow Steyerl to condemn the Turkish and German governments' version of events as "official state fiction" (they claim that Wolf's whereabouts are unknown). Moreover, although Steyerl self-reflexively questions her own role as the "concerned documentary filmmaker" in all of this as we have seen, there is no doubt that Wolf—and not someone else—was registered on film in 1983, and that she disappeared in 1998. Even at its most dense, the weave of signs that refer to other signs bottom out in the brutal fact of Wolf's continued absence. Official or not, fiction is still fiction and reality is something else.

To fully appreciate how complex reality can be, *November* and *Lovely Andrea* must be accompanied for consideration by a third film, *Abstract* (2012), in which Steyerl travels yet again, this time to the site where she believes Andrea was killed. Here again, the "pointing" *this*, inventories the features of both the cinematic syntax used to create the film ("This is a shot", "This is a countershot") and the site ("This is a beltscarf..." and "This is where my friend Andrea Wolf was killed in 1998.") The desire to know, the inability to simply give up and live with the images history has bequeathed to her, drives Steyerl to (re)visit sites of loss or trauma, so although the truth of Andrea's fate may never become fully clear, the question or problem of truth, or as I have been referring to it, the *desire* for the other, persists as a substructure for her work.

At the other end of the contemporary video spectrum are artists like Yael Bartana (b. 1970) and Omer Fast (b. 1972) who make scripted or semi-scripted narratives using high-definition RED cameras to craft fully cinematic experiences utterly foreign to Steyerl's "poor" images. Like Jeff Wall, Omer Fast invests in high production values and often grounds his films

in incidents he has witnessed or researched.¹⁰⁴ In *The Casting* (2007) and *Five Thousand Feet is the Best* (2011) he develops scenarios from real interviews, which are then performed by actors. Despite all this, and contrary to what one may expect based on his press releases,¹⁰⁵ Fast has stated that he is not interested in the fact-fiction pair, but rather different kinds of dynamic complexity, for example, the kind created by presenting a story and the response to that story simultaneously (Fast 2012). He is, however, interested in what happens when we take the structure of images and begin to dismantle them and rearrange their parts, a process highlighted by structural works like his single-channel video *CNN Concatenated* (2002) and the two-channel video installation *Glendive Foley* (2000). This careful retooling of particular documentary and narrative conventions interrupts expectations about how they work, which allows Fast to investigate difficult themes like war, mourning and trauma, or, more precisely, odd but powerful thematic clusters like war-history-entertainment or colonization-storytelling-retro-futurism.

In *5000 Feet is the Best*, Fast poses as a journalist interviewing a drone pilot, who is played by an unnamed actor (the film runs on a loop so there are no credits).¹⁰⁶ The interview scene repeats three times, with variations, each time followed by an interview with a real drone pilot, whose face and voice have been distorted to protect his identity (much like the sex archive staff worker in Steyerl's *Lovely Andrea*). The actor, rather than telling Fast's journalist about his work, spins three dramatic tales, each with their own plot and cast of characters. As he tells these stories they are dramatized for us on screen like very short movies, with his voice-over guiding us through the plot of each.

5000 Feet is the Best is a complex work, both in the strategies of storytelling (combining dramatic reenactments and an interview) and the thematic material (drone strikes, mistaken identities). Both combine to locate this film in an uneasy space between representation and reality. But Fast takes seriously not only the semiotic issues, but the ethical and historical

¹⁰⁴ At least one critic also noted the iconographical similarity between the aftermath of the battle in Fast's digital film *Continuity* (2012) and Wall's *Dead Troops Talk (A Vision After an Ambush of a Red Army Patrol, near Moqor, Afghanistan, Winter 1986)* (1986) (Fraser 2013).

¹⁰⁵ Typically, press releases sound like this one from the Rose Art Museum at Brandeis University on *5000 Feet is the Best*: "First shown at the 2011 Venice Biennale, the film melds fact and fiction together to explore the shifting divisions between reality and representation, and truth and memory" (Rose Art Museum 2013).

¹⁰⁶ The actor is Denis O'Hare, who is credited on the Internet Movie Database (Denis O'Hare 2014).

questions raised by his material, and I think it would be wrong to read his work as an argument of a Baudrillardian kind, that drones strikes have turned war into a large-scale and very expensive video game. The path from violent video games to military simulations is about as direct as the path from those simulations to drone strikes, which is to say both apparently direct and not. In an interview with a drone pilot, Fast learned that although the pilots sit in offices in Las Vegas, far from the scenes of destruction they cause, operators seem to exhibit PTSD symptoms (nightmares, for example) and struggle with the ethical implications of their actions, much as ground force soldiers do (Anonymous 2012, 111). Although nightmares are not “real” in the sense of being grounded in external mind-independent phenomena, they are also involuntary and have concrete physical consequences. When Fast’s journalist begins the interview, he asks the drone pilot (that is, the actor playing him), “What is the difference between you and someone who sits in an airplane?” And the reply is, “There’s no difference between us. We do the same job.”

Fast’s project is not exclusively devoted to the perspective of the drone pilot; in fact one of the most remarkable sequences comes through an attempt to unsettle the dominant (American) perspective of its military interventions in the Middle East through unusual juxtapositions of image and language. The sequence appears in one of the stories told by the drone pilot, in his voice-over. We see a family leave their sunny suburban home in their hatchback, which is loaded as if for a camping trip. “They stop at all the usual checkpoints...” the voice-over tells us, and we see this event enacted: the father leans out the window to show armed, visibly Asian military guards some documents. This is jarring, but we recover and grasp the reversal Fast has contrived: America, or at least this well-maintained, middle-class neighborhood is being occupied, under circumstances that are not explained. Has Chinese technological superiority surpassed America’s sufficiently to enabled its government to protect its foreign interests abroad, as the Americans have been used to doing? The unsettling idea is extended in the next scene, where the father slows for a truck and several men digging a hole at the side of the road. The voice-over refers to “men wearing traditional headdress” and “clothes more typical to tribes from further south”: the camera lingers on a man’s baseball cap and plaid shirt. Watching this the first time, I stumbled on this reversal, as I had with the reference to “check-points.” The concept itself is simple, but for a North American audience, it feels wrong, like trying to fit a square peg into a round hole. There is little time to meditate on this however, and suddenly we see this scene shot from above

in black and white, with Chinese characters alongside superimposed on what appears to be a surveillance feed from the sky. An enormous blast cuts through the sky and instantly carves a huge crater in the earth, destroying the men and their truck, and the family too.

The way Fast writes a language of foreignness over images of “us” is crude, even kitschy, but even on repeated viewings, I could feel my mind being stretched. The language of “tradition” and “tribes” calls attention to the way American English constructs Middle Eastern cultures as different, as geopolitical problems to be solved rather than as autonomous societies deserving of respect. I felt a moment of psychological rebellion at the application of a primitivist vocabulary to contemporary American figures, but that’s exactly the point. If a part of dominating others means giving them names, then how do we feel about having the names we coined for others applied to us? Language suddenly appears highly interested, one-sided and narrow. It calls attention to everything it excludes: to other temporalities, other names that people call themselves, and above all, our own inability to hear or understand them, which inevitably leads to further conflicts. In the presence of the unequal geopolitical power represented by the drones, there is no way for others to communicate their own difference in a meaningful way, and so we construct difference for them. Although no Iraqi, Yemeni or Afghani people or places are depicted in this story, they are made *palpably* absent somehow, like spirits in the bodies of Americans in their baseball caps and haunting a landscape that looks like Southern California. In other words, Fast has permitted us to see that the language we use to describe others is *our* language, and that we know much less than military experts we would like us to think.

Significantly, Fast does this not by replacing familiar, clichéd images with more “accurate” representations of foreign peoples, but by combining language and images that are both obviously ours in a way that renders them foreign. It is only in their juxtaposition that they shock. I think it is here that Fast arrives at object-priority, by showing how impoverished our language and images of Middle Eastern cultures are. We believe we understand foreign peoples but, as Edward Said observed long ago, too often remain trapped in an echo chamber of our own ideas about ourselves. What makes Fast’s sequence so remarkable is that the shock seems calculated less to cause offence than to spark curiosity (admitting that audience reactions, except for those of professional critics, remain undocumented). Even in the crudeness of the premise or in the use of some heavy Hollywood conventions, Fast’s work is never deliberately scandalous. He trips us up and we forgive, then find ourselves thanking him.

These problems of cultural communication are intensified as war drags on, drone strikes intensify and economies continue to globalize. “This epitomizes globalization,” Fast said, of drone warfare. And echoing Sekula, he stressed the interconnection of its various technical and human parts: “Because it’s not just a plane—it’s the transmission of data, it’s the satellites, it’s the remote stations that are located just outside of Las Vegas, it’s the people who drive there to work” (Fast 2012). There is also a thematic connection to *Fish Story* here, which also contains an uncanny image of a moving automaton. In 1992 Sekula and Dercon collaborated on the catalogue for Jean-Francois Chevrier’s exhibition *Walker Evans / Dan Graham* at Witte de With. It opened in August, providing Sekula with an opportunity photograph in Rotterdam, one of Europe’s busiest ports.¹⁰⁷ He photographed the ECT¹⁰⁸/Sea-Land Terminal at Maasvlakte, a harbor and industrial area near the city. Sekula, in his mildly philosophical, observational style, wrote in his notebook, on August 31, 1992: “At ECT terminal in Rotterdam, a new, fully-automated container loading system is being tested. Designed by an engineer who just retired, having maintained good relations w/ unions.” In September he returned, hitching a ride with a former lorry driver. “Uncanny,” he observed, noting the “sinister quality of unmanned vehicles” (like drones on wheels). A picture from this visit appears in the first chapter of *Fish Story*. From a depressed perspective we see a robot truck pull magisterially around into the background against an utterly desolate, unending plane of grey brick. Not a single figure is visible: it is a vision of the shipping industry without labor (Sekula 1992).

This photograph is placed in the sequence next to a portrait of a woman identified as “Pancake,” who sits on the ground by a hulking metal frame, scavenging copper in Los Angeles. The caption reports that she is a “former shipyard sandblaster.” The rusted metal box beside her is oriented such that its old and broken body echoes the form of the intact, painted Sea-Land container being driven without a driver, suggesting her job has been evaporated by automation. Thus the optimistic and slightly heroic vision of automation suggested by the robot trucks has its

¹⁰⁷ The Port of Rotterdam throughput places it fourth, behind Antwerp, Hamburg and Novorossiysk. In 2012 it handled about 450 million metric tonnes of cargo (Port of Rotterdam 2012a, 2012b).

¹⁰⁸ Europe Container Terminals. This company operates several ports in Europe. Its majority shareholder is Hutchison Cooperatief U.A., a subsidiary of Hutchinson Port Holdings Group (HPH), which manages ports in 26 countries on every continent. HPH is a subsidiary of the multinational conglomerate Hutchison Whampoa Limited (HWL) (ECT, n. d.).

flip-side in human consequences. Taken together, the pictures do not argue that Pancake has lost her livelihood because of the automation of the ECT/Sea-Land terminal, since that would be nonsensical. Instead, we must fill in the story ourselves. We can only guess at her exact circumstances. Containerization permits automation, which means lower shipping costs, which has permitted industry to move about globally, taking jobs with it to new locations. But it is precisely the unpredictable directions of these flows that gives the unusual juxtaposition of the two unrelated pictures its sense of truth. However much a situation seems to be certain and business is booming, it may very well disappear next year, lured by some complex combination of factors that make up the supply chain. Like Sekula, who eventually did go on to make a film version of *Fish Story* (*The Forgotten Space*), Fast offers stories as pieces or clues, to be assembled by viewers. The facts, in their exact detail, may be uncertain, but the consequences are undeniably real.

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